PEGGY RAYMOND AT "THE POPLARS"

HARRIET·LUMMIS·SMITH

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PEGGY RAYMOND
AT "THE POPLARS"

Stories by

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

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PEGGY RAYMOND AT "THE POPLARS"

Or The Friendly Terrace Quartette

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

Author of

"Peggy Raymond's Success," "Peggy Raymond's Vacation," "Peggy Raymond's Schooldays," Peggy Raymond's Way."

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The Friendly Terrace Quartette

CHAPTER I

AN END AND A BEGINNING

For full five minutes neither Peggy nor Priscilla had spoken. They sat side by side in the street-car, knitting for dear life, and each wore an expression of solemn intensity. Enough was happening, as far as that goes, to shadow the brightest face, but at this particular minute the two girls thought only of the khaki colored sweaters, growing to completeness under their unpracticed fingers. It was Peggy's second sweater. The first had been a joke, and to fail in this as well, would have been, in Peggy's estimation, nothing short of a tragedy.

The car stopped at the crossing to admit a little group of college girls, each with a knitting

bag on her arm. They made their way down the already crowded aisle, till within a few feet of the absorbed pair. Peggy and Priscilla looked up to nod and smile, and Peggy's hurrying fingers slackened their pace as she listened.

"They're talking about the history exam," she confided to Priscilla. "Everybody says Dr. Mackenzie gives terrific examinations. But do you know, I've hardly thought about it."

"Neither have I," owned Priscilla.

"I suppose I'll get through it all right. I'm pretty sure I shall. But somehow, Priscilla, I can't feel as if it would matter very much if I didn't."

"Yes, I know." Priscilla let her work fall. "Such big things are happening that the little things like doing well in college, or having a good time, don't seem to matter."

Both girls were silent for a moment. Like hundreds of thousands of others, they had changed their point of view completely within a short time. For many months they had been reading and talking about the great war raging across the sea. Strange foreign names had become familiar to their ears. They had shivered

over the tales of atrocities, and had thrilled to the stories of valorous deeds unsurpassed in history. And yet all the time there had been a sense of unreality about it. Peggy had felt as she did when she wept over the death of Jean Valjean.

But that was all past and gone. America's entry into the war made them feel as if they had waked up from a bad dream, only to find it a reality. Graham Wylie had volunteered at once, and then had come to Peggy to tell her what he done, a new grave manliness about him that made him seem many years older since the previous day.

"Oh, Graham," Peggy had said with a little catch in her voice, "does Ruth know?"

"Not yet. I wanted you to know first of anybody, Peggy."

"Poor Ruth!" Peggy's eyes filled with tears. She was so sorry for Graham's adoring sister. And then with a tremendous effort, she swallowed those tears and faced him with a rather quivery smile. Didn't the boys have enough to bear, she asked herself indignantly, without having girls crying and making a fuss?

Only—it would be terrible for poor little Ruth.

Peggy had always supposed that the ending of her Freshman year in college would be a memorable occasion. One whole year finished, and Sophomore dignities within reach! But for months she had gone through her duties almost mechanically, and now that commencement was at hand, the anticipated season had shrunk to insignificant proportions. The nation was girding up its loins, making ready for war, and the little ambitions and triumphs of every-day life were all dwarfed by the vastness of the moment.

Peggy and Priscilla left the car as the college girls were streaming from the dormitories in the direction of the chapel. The Friendly Terrace girls joined in the procession, but before they reached the chapel door, someone caught Peggy by the arm.

"Are you going to volunteer, Peggy Raymond? You're just the one to do it."

"Volunteer for what?" Peggy had wished herself years older and a trained nurse, countless times in the last few months. "There's nothing I can do that amounts to anything,"

she said with unwonted self-depreciation.

"Why, for the Land Army. Somebody is going to talk about it at chapel this morning. Don't you see how it is, Peggy? All the young men are called to the colors, and it's up to us girls to get to work and keep the world from starving to death."

Peggy was all interest. Priscilla on the other side, listened intently, occasionally asking a question, few of which the Junior who had intercepted them was able to answer. But what she lacked in information she made up in enthusiasm. A passion for service was sweeping the country, like a prairie fire, and these girls asked only a chance to serve somewhere, the harder the work and the more sacrifice involved, the better. Had the speaker of the morning presented her cause far less convincingly, she would still have met with a hearty response, for many of her audience had been waiting for just such an opportunity.

Since Peggy and Priscilla had entered college, the quartette of chums on Friendly Terrace had generally met some time during the afternoon, their long years of intimacy bridging the

chasm which separates College Freshmen from High School Seniors. On this particular afternoon they had all agreed to be on Amy Lassell's porch at five o'clock, the inevitable knitting bags, of course, accompanying them. Not one of the four girls would have thought of sitting down for a chat without a piece of knitting to employ her fingers.

Ruth was the only one of them to come on time. At five minutes after five Priscilla made her appearance, something in her manner suggesting excitement. But it was not till a quarter of an hour later that the usually punctual Peggy arrived, noticeably out of breath, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glowing. "What did your mother say?" she demanded of Priscilla, ignoring the others.

"Why, she says if we can be well taken care of—"

"Yes, so does mine. And she wants to be sure we can give up if we find it's too hard, but of course it won't be."

"What is it? What is it?" clamored Amy and Ruth in chorus, their accent betraying a sense of grievance. It had been a little hard

for both girls that Peggy and Priscilla shared so many interests from which they were shut out.

"The Land Army. We're going to enlist."

"To fight, you mean," gasped Ruth, turning pale. Ruth's imagination was a vivid one, and in a twinkling she had seen Peggy in a uniform, a rifle over her shoulder, marching away to perform deeds of daring. The others laughed at her look of consternation.

"Yes, to fight potato bugs and tomato worms," remarked Amy. "I've heard about it before. Tell us everything you know, Peggy."

Peggy repeated the substance of the morning's address at the college chapel, occasionally prompted by Priscilla when her memory proved inadequate. For once the knitting was neglected. Khaki-colored balls of wool dropped to the floor and sought inaccessible positions under the porch chairs, taking a mean advantage of their owners' absorption. The four heads almost touched as the girls leaned forward, unwilling to lose a word. Their faces were as serious as if the outcome of the war depended on their efforts.

"But it isn't just college girls who are wanted, is it?" asked Ruth presently. "Anyway Amy and I are through High School, now. We're the same as Freshmen."

"I think they're glad to take anybody who is strong enough," Peggy answered, with a significant emphasis on the last two words. Now that Graham was at the training camp, she felt an added sense of responsibility for Graham's sister.

"She's hitting at me, I suppose," said Amy, while Ruth's ready color rose. "It's true that I'm rather delicate for a farm hand."

"You're always saying you want to reduce, Amy Lassell. Here's your chance. Eight hours of pitching hay will do it, if anything will."

"That doesn't tempt me as much as the overalls. Once I dressed up in some of Dick Raymond's clothes for a charade and I've never forgotten how unhampered I felt. I don't wonder little boys cry to be put into trousers."

"You must think it's going to be a joke, Amy," remonstrated Priscilla, on whom her friend's irrepressible gaiety sometimes jarred,

especially in these strenuous and anxious days. "It won't be anything of the sort, believe me, up at half past five every morning except Sunday."

Amy made a wry face. She insisted on being called regularly at seven, and then turned over and went to sleep again, till routed out at quarter of eight by her scandalized mother. "You can't really enjoy *being* asleep," explained Amy, when taken to task for her inconsistency. "The fun is in *going* to sleep, especially after you know it is time to be up."

Priscilla followed up her advantage. "And there won't be an ice cream parlor on every corner. And I dare say we won't taste candy once while we're away."

"I've given it up anyway till the war's over," Amy said quietly. "I saw in a window somewhere the weekly sugar ration in England and France and Italy, and then a pile showing how much we average here in America. I never felt so like a pig in my life. I ought to be a regular sylph by fall," she added blithely, "pitching hay all summer, and doing without ice cream and candy."

"I don't suppose we'd all have to pitch hay, would we?" asked Ruth a little anxiously. While not an especially delicate girl she was far from robust and the activities of the hay field impressed her as somewhat formidable.

"The haying season doesn't last so very long," Peggy explained wisely. "But all the work is hard—almost too hard for you, I'm afraid, dearie."

"Oh, don't, Peggy!" Ruth cried sharply. "I can stand it all right and I want to do my bit just as much as the rest of you do."

"But there are other things to do besides farming."

"Oh, yes, knitting." Ruth's tone was contemptuous.

"I guess when the cold weather comes the boys will be glad of every bit of knitting."

"And then the Red Cross wants workers for the surgical dressings," suggested Priscilla.

"Yes, I know." Ruth's face whitened. "But it doesn't seem to me I could possibly do that work—not if there was anybody else to do it. Every time I made a bandage I'd think of Graham wounded."

The other girls were silent. Ruth was the only one of the four with a brother in the service. "You've done more than all the rest of us together, more than we can do all summer," cried Peggy at length, "no matter how hard we work."

"I know what you mean, Peggy, but Graham's work isn't mine. If my life goes on just the same as ever, except for a little knitting, and a little extra self denial, I wouldn't blame Graham a bit for disowning me when he comes home."

The situation was becoming critical. Ruth's tears were very near the surface. Amy came to the rescue by asking if a knowledge of farm work would be a necessity for enlistment in the Land Army. "For I have never done any gardening, even. When they set me to weeding I always pulled up the plants that dared show their heads above the ground and left the ragweed to flourish."

"We'll all be ignoramuses together," said Priscilla, "the rawest of raw recruits. But so are all the boys who are enlisting. They'll learn and so will we."

The talk went on and the six o'clock whistle

blew and nobody paid any attention, till Dick Raymond came across the street to tell Peggy that dinner was on the table. Then the three girls collected their balls of wool from the remotest corners of the porch, and took their departure, while Amy went indoors to startle the family with the announcement of her plans for the summer.

Within a week everything was settled. Commencement was over, Ruth and Amy were the possessors of high school diplomas. Peggy and Priscilla had finished their first year in college, and had a right to call themselves Sophomores. But none of the four were thinking much of what had been accomplished. All were looking forward to what was about to begin. Mrs. Wylie had held out against Ruth's entreaties to be allowed to join the Land Army, as she was sure her daughter was not strong enough for such work, but the other three girls were enrolled for the hand-to-hand conflict against the grim forces of Famine.

CHAPTER II

LIBERTY BOND

The drive for the first Liberty Loan was on. Banners inscribed with patriotic sentiments decorated the down-town streets. On the corners little groups gathered around sweating orators who made brief, pithy appeals to the loyalty of the crowd. It seemed to Peggy that she could not put her hand out of the window without hearing a band playing somewhere.

Elaine Marshall, who still lived next door, came in one evening to discuss a certain perplexing matter with Peggy, and Peggy absorbed in the preparation of the weird wardrobe which her summer's campaign demanded, listened abstractedly as she made buttonholes for a pair of overalls.

"It's the liberty loan that's worrying me," said Elaine, as she settled herself in a chair and began to knit. "People seem to take it for granted that if you're earning, you're going to

take a bond. But I really don't see how I can manage it, Peggy. It's hard enough for us to make ends meet, at the best of times, and everybody says prices are going to be terrible."

"I don't think you ought to be expected to do a thing," Peggy cried. The war was still young and multitudes of people older than Peggy were not yet alive to the situation. "Father has subscribed all he can," she went on, "and that'll have to do for this family. Dick is too little, and of course mother can't, and as far as I'm concerned—"

She paused in her sewing, a wrinkle between her brows. Elaine watched her expectantly over her knitting.

"They're going to pay us farmerettes a dollar and a half a day," Peggy explained. "But a dollar of that will go for our keep, and that will leave us fifty cents. Half a dollar a day isn't much for spending money."

"I should think not," exclaimed Elaine. "Carfare and the simplest sort of luncheon doesn't leave much out of half a dollar."

"Well, I shan't have to pay any car fare, or buy any luncheon, either, but there'll be other

things. If I were going to work all the year it would be different, but in the fall, I'll be back in college with no chance to earn. Of course I'd love to buy bonds," added Peggy as she took up her interrupted sewing, "and so would you, but we will have to be satisfied with doing what we can. After all they don't expect that sort of help from girls like us."

Peggy's complacency was destined to be short-lived. The bell rang just as she finished her little speech, and as she happened to be the only member of the family at home, she ran downstairs to answer the summons. A small, untidy figure stood on the steps.

"Miss Peggy, I come to tell you that Elvie can't wash to-morror, 'cause Ma's sick."

Peggy sighed over the news. Sally had been called home by illness in the family, and for some weeks Mrs. Raymond had been doing her own work, with the assistance of Elvira Bond, the oldest daughter of a large family, who came once a week to wash and clean. The Bonds were one of the shiftless households who never have a dollar ahead and Peggy wondered that the loss of a day's wages should be accepted

with such equanimity as the manner of the small messenger indicated.

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry to hear that, Mattie. Can Elvira come Wednesday, then?"

"No, I guess not. Not till next week."

"Well, if your mother's sick, I suppose it can't be helped," remarked Peggy resignedly, at the same time resolving to rise early and make an onslaught on the laundry basket. "Tell Elvira we'll look for her next week."

Mattie turned to go, then halted on the lowest step and faced about. In the faint light Peggy could see her beautiful grin.

"Miss Peggy, we've got a Liberty Bond at our house."

"A what, Mattie?"

"Yes'm, a Liberty Bond." Mattie's smile seemed to expand and irradiate her entire unkept little person. She appeared all smile.

"Why, Mattie, I don't see how your father with his big family could spare fifty dollars—"

"Our'n is worth more'n that." Mattie chuckled rapturously, as she perceived the impression she was making on Peggy.

"A hundred dollar bond!" exclaimed Peggy, in awe-stricken tones.

"It's worth more'n that, Miss Peggy. I dunno how much but it's more'n that."

"For goodness sake," gasped Peggy. She stood in the doorway, petrified with astonishment, while Mattie vanished, emitting snorts of satisfaction, distinctly audible long after the darkness had swallowed her up.

Peggy closed the door and went back upstairs, her face so rueful that Elaine exclaimed at the sight of it. "Why, Peggy, what's the matter?"

Peggy stared at her friend with unseeing eyes. "Elmira's mother's sick, so she can't come to wash to-morrow."

"Too bad," commiserated Elaine. "I guess you'll be glad when Sally's back."

"Elaine," exclaimed Peggy, ignoring the proffered sympathy," they've bought a bond."

"Who have?"

"Why, Elvira's folks, those shiftless Bonds. And there are eight children and only two of them are earning anything, Elvira, and a boy about fifteen."

Elaine waited for more. Her insight told her

the direction Peggy's thoughts were taking.

"Mr. Bond doesn't have work, only about half the time, and then he doesn't earn a great deal. And he's subscribed more than a hundred dollars. Mattie wasn't sure just how much. And there are ten in the family."

"Probably he didn't pay for his bond," suggested Elaine. "I suppose he promised to pay so much a week, and very likely he won't be able to meet the payments."

"Of course he didn't pay for it. I don't suppose Mr. Bond ever saw a hundred dollars all at once, in his whole life. But to think of his trying to do it. To think of his feeling responsible."

Elaine knitted in silence, and Peggy continued reflectively. "If I work twenty-five days each month for three months, that'll be seventy-five days, won't it?"

"Yes, but, Peggy, you mightn't be able to work as many as that. Besides leaving out the Sundays, you've got to allow for being sick, and for rainy days."

"Rainy days," repeated Peggy dismayed. "Can't we work on rainy days?"

"I shouldn't think it would be very good for you, Peggy Raymond, working in a downpour."

"Oh, we'll soon get toughened, so we won't mind little things like that. Only I'm afraid that there's a good deal of farm work you can't do in the rain—like haying, you know. We'll call it sixty days. I'm sure I can work twenty days out of each month. At fifty cents a day, that means thirty dollars, more than half enough for a fifty dollar bond."

"But, Peggy, you're not allowing yourself anything for spending money. And you said yourself that fifty cents a day was little enough."

"All I'll need money for is for postage stamps, and anyway I've got a year to pay for the bond in, at a dollar a week."

"Peggy, how are you going to earn money when you're in college?"

"Why, some girls pay their way through college, and lots do something to help themselves. It would be a pity if I couldn't earn a few dollars to pay for a Liberty Bond." Peggy laughed out unexpectedly as Elaine's expression seemed to accuse her of inconsistency.

"The fact is, Elaine," she declared, "I can't stand it to be beaten by Elvira's father. If he can do it, I can."

Elaine pondered. "I meant to go to the seashore for my vacation this summer, to a Y. W. C. A. place, you know, where they make the prices as low as they can. But even if it isn't expensive, what it would cost would go quite a way toward buying a bond."

"The question is whether you don't need that vacation, Elaine."

Elaine met her friend's glance with a twinkle of fun. "No, Peggy, the question is whether I'm going to let Elvira's father get ahead of me."

Peggy's face was radiant. "Of course you won't. Somehow I see things so different from what I did half an hour ago, Elaine. It's going to be a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull all together. Everybody's got to help, the Bonds, and you and I and John D., and all the rest of the millionaires."

The story of patriotism exhibited by Elvira's father proved equally effective when Peggy told it at the breakfast table. "If Sally doesn't

come back," said Mrs. Raymond, thoughtfully, "I won't try to get another girl. I'll just turn what I save on her wages in on a bond."

"Oh, mother, I don't like the idea of your working so hard in hot weather."

"I hardly think you're the one to talk, Peggy," said Mrs. Raymond, with a faint smile. She was a patriotic woman and willing that her daughter should do the work that seemed to be needed, but the thought of Peggy as a farm hand gave her a little shock, every time it crossed her mind.

"I'm going to buy a hundred dollar bond," announced Dick challengingly. "I'm going to work this summer. Our grocer says he'll give me a job."

"Why, Dick Raymond!" Peggy's shining eyes travelled around the table. "I'm glad I belong to this sort of a family," she cried jubilantly. "It makes me feel as if there was nothing I couldn't do."

But the little candle was to throw its beams still further. The Friendly Terrace girls rallied as a man to Peggy's standard. "If you can do it, I can," said Amy, and proceeded to

pay a dollar down on a fifty dollar bond. Priscilla had been promised a victrola for her birthday, and she decided to ask for its value in bonds instead, no slight sacrifice to the music-loving Priscilla. And Ruth, who was in the depths of dejection because the family doctor had backed her mother up in her opinion that she was not strong enough for farm work, announced rather ungraciously her intention to become the owner of a government bond.

"I've not the slightest idea how I'm ever going to pay for it. But I don't intend to be the only one of us four to be left out of serving her country. No, Peggy, don't say that about Graham again. What I want is to do something my own self."

Little things were happening all the time to show that the patriotism of the Bond family, remarkable as it had seemed, was not an isolated instance. Mr. Raymond had been one of a committee to go through a factory, soliciting subscriptions. When one of the girls had refused to subscribe, the young woman at the next machine had turned on her almost savagely.

"I'm going to take one," she cried. "And if

I can, you can. You've only yourself to look after, and I've got my two children."

"No one could possibly expect you to take a bond," Mr. Raymond had exclaimed, but the aggrieved air with which the young woman faced him, suggested that she was anything but grateful for the sympathy. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded, "I guess my money's just as good as a millionaire's." And she closed the controversy by signing her name and paying her dollar.

Peggy was thrilled by the number of people she saw wearing the loan button, all sorts of people, clerks, and factory hands, club women, and business men, and boys. This universal response to the government's appeal gave her a new realization of the country's solidarity. She looked down at her own button, and felt a little twinge of conscience, as she realized how recent was her change of view. Blessings on Elvira's father who had brought her to her senses in time.

The preparations for the summer were almost complete. Each of the girls had a stock of shirt-waists, overalls for work on the farm,

bloomers for "dress up" wear, and big straw hats lined with green. They had posed for a picture on the Raymond's back door step, arrayed in their regimentals, while Ruth, a smile on her lips, but with bitterness in her heart, held the camera and pressed the button at the psychological moment. Of the three, Priscilla looked most mannish, thanks to her height and breadth of shoulder. Peggy, blushing rosily under the big hat, was evidently a pretty girl in unaccustomed attire, while Amy made such an adorable, plump little boy that the others never tired of admiring her.

"Peggy," said Mrs. Raymond the day before the girls were to start, "if you can find time, I wish you'd go over to the Bonds and see if Elvira is coming to wash Tuesday. For if I can't depend on her I shall have to get some one else."

Peggy found time for the errand within the next half hour, and with Amy for company, started in the direction of Elvira's home. Though the distance was not great, the appearances of the houses changed rapidly as they walked eastward. A few blocks from Friendly

Terrace cheap, small shops became frequent, interspersed among the residences, and across the railroad tracks, the social thermometer took a precipitate drop. The Bonds occupied one of a row of tiny houses built along a narrow ledge that fell away abruptly, both in front and in the rear, and which had been named most aptly, Precipice Place. It was reached by a flight of wooden steps that zig-zagged drunkenly up the side of the embankment, and was the only means of reaching the houses, except by airplane. On each visit Peggy wondered anew how the youthful Bonds managed to avoid broken bones, especially in winter.

Mattie and two other children were playing on the steps of one of the cottages and at the sight of Peggy and her companion they set up a combined shout, "Elvie, Miss Peggy's here."

Elvira, a big, slatternly girl, came smiling to the door and in response to Peggy's inquiry, expressed the opinion that she would be able to wash for Mrs. Raymond the following Tuesday. "I guess Ma'll be able to spare me by then. Say, Miss Peggy, didn't Mattie tell you we'd got a Liberty Bond?"

"Yes, she did, Elvira. That's splendid."

"Wouldn't you all like to see it? Walk right in."

"Why yes, we'd like it very much, Elvira," replied Peggy a trifle absently. She was thinking that after all, Elvira's father must have paid cash for his bond as they were not delivered till paid for. She wondered if the family had received a windfall in the shape of a legacy. Nothing in the room they had entered, with its bare floor and dilapidated furnishings, gave ground for any such opinion, but Elvira's smile was unusually expansive, and then too, there was the liberty bond.

Elvira was coming back, carrying something wrapped in a blanket. "Here it is, Miss Peggy," she said proudly. "Here's our Liberty Bond!"

Peggy looked in silence. A little red face showed against the folds of the dingy blanket. A pair of small red hands made rather aimless gestures.

"A week old to-day she is," beamed Elvira. "When we told Pa it was a girl, he says quick as a wink, 'Then we'll call her Liberty. Liberty

Bonds is all the rage now,' Pa says. I guess you fell for it, Miss Peggy."

Elvira broke into a ringing laugh and after a bewildered pause, Peggy and Amy joined her. They laughed so uproariously that Liberty opened her round eyes and stared at them. And then as they laughed all the harder, she closed her eyes again, apparently deciding that it was useless to waste energy in the attempt to understand these strange beings among whom her lot had been cast.

Amy and Peggy did not dare look at each other till they had left Precipice Place at a safe distance behind. Then they surprised the onlookers by going off into a spasm of merriment which left them gasping and wet-eyed.

"To think," choked Amy, wiping away the tears, "that we all subscribed for bonds, because we thought Elvira's father had. The joke's on us, all right."

Peggy sobered very suddenly. "The joke's on us," she said, "but the thanks go to the Bond baby. She's the one who got us started, bless her heart! I expect to tell my grandchildren that I subscribed to every issue of government

bonds in the Great War, and if it hadn't been for little Liberty, the story would have been spoiled."

Amy laughed again, then sobered as she saw how much Peggy was in earnest.

"I was just going along thinking the bonds were none of my business," explained Peggy breathlessly. "And I persuaded Elaine that they were none of *her* business, and I might have made you girls think so too. I can't understand now, how it was possible for me to feel that way, but I did, and I might have kept right on if it hadn't been for Liberty Bond. I've got a silver baby spoon with a curled-up handle, you know, that some one gave me when I was little and I'm going to send it to that child."

Peggy was as good as her word. The very next day the postman delivered a small package addressed to Miss Liberty Bond, 33 Precipice Place, with Peggy's name and address written in the upper left-hand corner. The Bond family was unanimous in declaring it "just like Miss Peggy." What they failed to understand was that the little spoon was pre-

sented in recognition of services little Liberty Bond had already rendered to her country and her flag.

CHAPTER III

RUTH FINDS HER NICHE

Ruth had been down to the train to see the girls start on their great adventure. It is never particularly inspiring to see one's friends off, unless one's own plans are definite and interesting. Ruth had no plans and the summer stretching ahead of her seemed as dark and cheerless as an Arctic winter. Ruth lacked the sunniness of disposition which enabled Peggy to adapt herself contentedly to her circumstances. Indeed she possessed something of a talent for making the worst of things, and as she retraced her steps in the direction of Friendly Terrace, which now seemed to her a veritable deserted village, her heavy heart grew heavier moment by moment.

Instead of going indoors where she would encounter her mother, and in sheer decency be obliged to assume an air of cheerfulness, Ruth

dropped into a chair on the porch, and gave herself up to the luxury of being miserable. Out of the quartette of chums she was left alone. Peggy had talked about missing her, but that was only Peggy's dearness. They could not possibly miss her as she missed them, with an aching, ever-present sense of emptiness and loss. There would be too much to do for them to miss anybody, too much excitement, too much novelty. The girls had all promised to write, but it did not require much insight to guess that there would be little time for letters.

In justice to Ruth it should be said that her sense of utter dejection was not altogether selfish. Multitudes of young people the country over were awakening to a sense of responsibility for others, and Ruth too was eager to do her share. It was humiliating to think there was no niche she could fill. Graham was in uniform, training for service across the water. Peggy and Priscilla and Amy would spend the summer toiling that the hungry might be fed. But there seemed no place where Ruth was especially needed. It occurred to her that she would feel decidedly better if she could cry about it, but

as so often happens when tears would be a relief, they would not come. Dry-eyed, but with an ache in her throat. and a heavy lump where her heart should have been, she sat staring at the pink rambler roses, opening in the June sunshine as joyously as if war had never been heard of.

The sound of passing footsteps drew Ruth's eyes from the pink roses to the side-walk. A tall, slender young fellow was just opposite the porch, and he lifted his hat as her eyes met his. Ruth nodded indifferently. She had known Nelson Hallowell ever since she could remember, and though she both liked and respected him, as most people did, she was too absorbed by her unhappiness to spare any thought for her neighbor. A feeling of distinct irritation blended with her surprise when she realized that he was coming up the walk. Why couldn't people let her alone, she asked herself with the unreasonableness born of depression.

Nelson's ground for stopping, it appeared, was a very natural one. "Good afternoon, Ruth. What do you hear from Graham?"

Ruth had the grace to feel ashamed of herself.

She realized that Nelson had misinterpreted her melancholy air, assuming it was anxiety over Graham, while as a matter of fact, her own disappointment had overshadowed for the time being her concern for her brother's safety. Stammering a little, Ruth replied that Graham was well, and that if his letters could be relied upon, enjoying camp life immensely. "Sit down, Nelson," she added, with a feeling of compunction for her passing annoyance. "You're home early, aren't you?"

Nelson did not accept her belated hospitality. "I've left the store," he said quietly. "I'm going to enlist."

"You, Nelson?" Ruth's voice, rather than her words, showed her astonishment. "But you're not old enough to be drafted."

"I'll be twenty in October. But we Hallowells haven't ever waited to be made to go." The blood flushed his thin cheeks as he made this boast. "I had a great grandfather, I believe it was, in the Revolutionary war, and there's been a Hallowell in every little mix-up we've had since. I'm the last of the line and I felt as if I couldn't stand it to stay at home."

Ruth stared at his transfigured face, hardly recognizing her shy, quiet neighbor. "But, Nelson, I don't see how your mother can let you go. I thought—"

She broke off her impulsive speech half way, realizing that her interest was carrying her unduly far.

Nelson's eyes glowed. "Oh, Mother's game all right," he said. "I've just been aching to get into the uniform, but I didn't say a word, because I thought she couldn't spare me. I'm all she's got, and besides I'm earning a decent salary now, and she can take things a little easier than she used to. Mother guessed what I was thinking and one night a week ago, she told me that if I wanted to go, not to worry a bit about her."

"Some firms are paying salaries to the men that enlist," Ruth reminded him.

Nelson laughed. "Well, I don't look for anything like that from Mr. Flynn. He doesn't approve of my going at all. In fact he's spent most of the time for the last week arguing to show me how perfectly unreasonable it is for a fellow to go until he has to. It won't be so

easy to fill my place as it would be in ordinary times."

"I suppose he'll give you your job back when the war's over."

"He says not. I imagine it depends on whether he gets anybody who suits him in the meantime."

Ruth's eyes flashed. "He ought to be ashamed of himself, making it hard for you to serve your country."

"I don't think Mr. Flynn quite understands," Nelson explained excusingly. "He thinks I'm carried away by excitement, and that I don't realize what war is like. It's just because I do realize that I want to have a hand in it." His boyish mouth drew into a straight uncompromising line and he stared ahead as if he saw not the peaceful streets of his native city, but ravished Belgium and bleeding France.

Ruth recalled him by a practical question. "But, Nelson, what is your mother going to do?"

"Why, she'll have part of my pay, you know, and something from the government. And she says she'll get along, and I'm not to worry. I

wish the house was paid for. You see we bought it before father died, and we've been paying off the mortgage a little at a time." He fidgeted with his hat, his face overcast. "Mother laughs at me for worrying, but she isn't getting any younger, and I'd hoped her hard years were over." He added as he held out his hand, "Drop in to see her now and then, won't you, Ruth?"

"Of course I will, Nelson." Ruth clasped his hand tightly. "I think she's wonderful. I don't know how she can be so brave and splendid."

Nelson's eyes glowed at her praise. "Yes, she's all right, mother is. If I begin to worry about next winter with the fires to look after and prices still higher, as they're bound to be, she won't hear a word. If there were more mothers like her, there wouldn't be any need of the draft."

Ruth sat watching him as he went down the street. The tall slender figure, with the slight stoop to the shoulders, had little about it to suggest the soldier, but Ruth realized vaguely that this boy and his mother were typical of a

great peace-loving nation that had heard the call to arms. She found herself thrilled, eager. Her late sense of grievance had vanished like a mist in the sun. She was ashamed of her pettiness.

As Nelson passed around the corner, two blocks away and disappeared from her sight, Ruth started impetuously to her feet. She rushed into the house to find her mother, and half an hour later emerged bright-eyed and radiant, a very different girl from the one who had sat moping on the porch. "Wish me luck, momsie," she called over her shoulder.

"Yes, dear, I do." Mrs. Wylie came to the door, smiling bravely, though she knew the tears would fall as soon as Ruth was fairly out of sight. What a world it had become, with her boy in the training camp, and her little girl stepping out of the protection of home to take her place in the ranks of the world's workers. Ruth would never know, not at least till she was a woman herself, what that smile cost her mother.

Mr. Flynn, proprietor of the University Book Store, was just finishing waiting on a customer

when a slender girl dressed in brown walked in and stood at his elbow. Mr. Flynn's face was puckered as if he were eating a very sour apple. He had lost the assistant on whom he had grown to depend and he could see no chance for taking a summer vacation. Moreover if all the university students were going to enlist there would be a serious falling-off in business. Mr. Flynn felt out of sorts with all the world. He gave his customer her change as if he grudged her every penny, and then turned his forbidding gaze on Ruth. "Well," he barked, "what can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a position," explained Ruth, her cheeks flushed under his irritable attention.

"A position? What experience have you had in a book store?"

"I haven't had any experience anywhere," Ruth replied, with spirit. "I've just graduated from high school."

"Hm! . . ." Mr. Flynn stroked his bristling gray beard. His mood was savage enough so he would have found satisfaction in giving Ruth a curt dismissal, but common sense whispered that such a course would be unwise.

It did not require any especial prophetic gift to foresee that labor would be scarce in the near future, and wages high. It was necessary for him to get help at once, and the girl looked intelligent. Mr. Flynn called Ruth to the back of the store, gave her a chair and questioned her as to her qualifications. When he offered her just half of what he had been paying Nelson, Flynn's manner became almost genial.

"I am paying you very well indeed, Miss Wylie, considering you are just a beginner," he informed her. "But of course I can do better when you are thoroughly familiar with the business. In course of time—"

"But you see I only want—" Ruth interrupted and then stopped short, fearing that she had been indiscreet. Mr. Flynn fixed his little gray eyes upon her. They seemed to be boring into her like gimlets.

"You were just saying—"

Ruth could not think of any way to finish the sentence, but the one she had originally intended. "I only want to keep the position," she stammered, "till Nelson Hallowell gets back from the war."

Mr. Flynn made a gesture as if he were brushing something aside. "As far as young Hallowell is concerned, I feel under no obligations to him. He is not yet twenty and by the time he is of the draft age, the war will probably be over. He left me in the lurch because he lost his head about going to war, as so many young fellows do. If you give satisfaction you shall have the place, whether he comes back or not."

Ruth rose abruptly. As a rule she was a rather diffident girl in the presence of strangers, but her indignation made short work of her shyness.

"You think I would do that!" Her voice rang through the room like a bell. "You think I'd keep a soldier's job if he came back and wanted it. I'd rather starve."

Mr. Flynn looked up at her in an astonishment apparently blended with an alarmed uncertainty as to what she would do next. Ruth's righteous indignation vanished at the sight of his bewildered face, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing. She realized that it was useless getting angry with Mr. Flynn. He did not speak her language. He was constitutionally

incapable of understanding what other people felt in the crisis.

"Well," Mr. Flynn said soothingly after a pause, "it's not a question that has to be settled to-day, and it's one of my rules never to go ahead to meet trouble. Now if you have time, you might spend the afternoon making yourself familiar with your new duties."

Ruth took off her hat and under Mr. Flynn's supervision went to work. All through the afternoon customers dribbled in and out, and after Ruth had made one or two sales she began to feel extremely businesslike and important. It was nearly five o'clock and Mr. Flynn was preparing to lock up when the door opened and a familiar figure appeared.

"Good afternoon, I found that I left my pocket knife—" Nelson stopped short as his gaze fell on Ruth. He stared at her in speechless amazement.

"You see, Hallowell," remarked Mr. Flynn in evident enjoyment of his surprise, "that your position didn't stay vacant very long."

Nelson recovered himself. "I'm glad you weren't inconvenienced, sir."

"The young lady takes hold as if she were going to make good. By the time she has been here as long as you have," said Mr. Flynn maliciously, "you won't be able to teach her anything."

"I'm sure of that," Nelson replied, and went to the back of the room to find his missing knife. But Ruth felt hot and uncomfortable. There was no reason why Nelson should be aggrieved over the discovery that she had so promptly stepped into his shoes, yet she thought she had seen a hurt wonder in his eyes. As a matter of fact, there is something in human nature which resents the discovery that one's place can be so easily filled.

Ruth watched Nelson shrewdly as he came back with his knife in his hand. He exchanged a few words with Mr. Flynn and then stopped to speak with her. Ruth thought his smile was forced. In a moment she had made up her mind.

"Are you going directly home, Nelson?"

"Yes."

"Then, wait a minute for me, unless you are in a hurry."

She went to the back of the store for her hat, said good night to her new employer, and joined Nelson on the side walk. His manner had become propitiatingly friendly, almost, Ruth thought, as if he were accusing himself of having done her an injustice in his thoughts and was determined to atone for it.

Ruth was not naturally so outspoken as Peggy, but some experiences in her past life had taught her how much unhappiness can be saved by a little plain speaking. She did not mean to repeat her former mistakes. "You must have been surprised to see me here, Nelson," she said. "It looked as if I were in a great hurry to take your place."

The blood rushed to the roots of his hair. "Why, no, indeed, Ruth," he remonstrated. "Somebody had to have the position. I'm glad it's you."

"I *was* in a hurry, though, Nelson, and I'll tell you why. You said Mr. Flynn wouldn't promise you your position when you came back. But I only want it till you're ready to take it. You know, don't you, that I wouldn't keep it a minute longer?"

His flush deepened. "That's awfully white of you, Ruth, but it's not my job now, and I haven't any more right to it than any other fellow."

"You've every right to it," she said a little angrily. "I'm just holding it down till you come back. And that isn't all, Nelson. I want to pay part of my salary to your mother."

Nelson stopped short. "Ruth Wylie, what are you talking about? Do you suppose my mother— We're not objects of charity."

She caught him by the arm, and looked him in the face till his eyes dropped before her indignant gaze.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Nelson. Charity! Aren't you giving up everything, your home and your chance to get ahead and perhaps your life. Isn't your mother giving you? And don't you understand that a girl who can't fight, or even farm, may want to do something for her country, want it so much that it *hurts*."

The tears that would have been a relief a few hours earlier, but were only a nuisance now, suddenly blinded her. She swallowed and

blinked and coughed and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief and still they kept coming.

The two young people walked for some distance without saying a word and then Nelson broke the silence. "War or no war," he declared, "this is a fine and dandy old world!"

"Isn't it?" cried Ruth and the radiance of the face lifted to his made the tears upon her cheeks seem decidedly incongruous.

CHAPTER IV

STICKING TOMATOES

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding - ding - ding! *Ding!*

Peggy sat up in bed. At once she knew what had happened. The house was on fire and it all came from Dick's being so careless with matches. Drowsily she struggled to recall what it was that she meant to save first, when that dread, lurking somewhere in every civilized brain, came to realization.

"Peggy! Peggy! Wake up. Don't you hear the gong?"

It was Priscilla's voice, a trifle peremptory, but reassuringly casual. Peggy opened her eyes with an effort suggesting that the lids had been glued down. She was not in her room at home, that simple, inexpensively furnished little room, that nevertheless had the charm of individuality and good taste, lacking in many a pretentious apartment. This room was big

and cheerless. There was no carpet on the floor, no pictures on the walls, no curtains at the windows. It contained a number of cot beds, placed so near together that if two girls had tried to get into bed on the same side and at the same moment, a collision would have been unavoidable. The two dressers, one at either end of the room, seemed rather inadequate, compared with the number of beds. From the room beyond there came the sound of voices and the light thudding of stockinged feet on the bare floor.

"Peggy Raymond," scolded Priscilla, as Peggy looked about her blinking, "aren't you ever going to wake up?"

And then Peggy remembered. She was not a college girl, taking things a bit easy in honor of the summer vacation. She was a farmerette, a working woman with a hard day before her. Peggy came out of bed with a bound. As she scrambled into her unaccustomed clothing, she realized that it was not the middle of the night, as her sleepy brain had assumed, but early on a June morning. The glimpses she caught of the outdoor world presented a strangely un-

familiar aspect, lights and shadows unknown later in the day. Peggy remembered that the rising gong was to sound at half past five.

Considering that forty girls were awake and stirring in the farmhouse, there was surprisingly little chatter. The girls realized the need of haste. Breakfast was at six and after dispatching that meal they were expected to help in washing dishes, and making the beds, as a preliminary to the real work of the day. Out of the two score girls in the company, a few had been at work a month and they assumed the airs of seasoned farmers. The majority had been broken in a week or ten days earlier while a half dozen or so, including the three Friendly Terrace girls, had arrived only the previous evening and were distinctly "green hands."

A big, upstanding girl, who had slept at the end of the room, came up to Peggy as she was trying to get a peep in the mirror over a cluster of shoulders whose owners had preëmpted the desirable location, by virtue of being first on the ground. "You ain't got no need to worry about the way your hair looks," observed the buxom stranger. "Nobody's going

to notice, and by bed-time you won't care a rap yourself."

Peggy replied politely that she thought this very likely. The intonation of the girl who had accosted her awakened her surprise. All those she had talked with the previous day had been high school or college students, some of them college graduates, all of her own sort. This girl was distinctly different. Her accent reminded Peggy of Elvira Bond. She wondered vaguely how she came to be there.

Evidently her curiosity was reciprocated. "What's your name?" asked the jarring voice, so unnecessarily loud that half a dozen girls turned their heads to see if the inquiry had been addressed to them.

"Margaret Raymond, but almost everybody calls me Peggy."

"Mine's Margaret, too, in Pa's Bible, but I don't answer to nothing but Mag. Mag Whipple. Don't look as if you knew much about farm work."

"No, it's all new to me," Peggy was ashamed of herself for resenting Mag's air of patronage. She was ready to be kind to a girl whose

lack of culture put her at a disadvantage, but it was a little hard to put up with airs of superiority at the same time.

"There ain't much about a farm that I don't know," boasted Mag. "Pa he got the idea that there wasn't enough money in farming, and a year ago he sold out and come to town, and say, I don't like it a little bit. I don't feel as if I had elbow room. But when I heard about this here farmerette stunt, I says to myself, that's the job for me."

The gong below stairs announced breakfast and the procession started. Mag Whipple kept at Peggy's side as they went down the stairs. "Kind of makes me laugh the airs some of 'em put on," she remarked confidentially. "All they know about farming they've picked up in two or three weeks and to hear 'em you'd think they'd been born and raised twenty miles from a railroad. How do you reckon that they'll show up when it comes to pitching hay?"

Peggy was not particularly pleased to find Mag at her right hand as the girls took their seats at the long table, roughly constructed of planks placed across wooden trestles, and

covered with an oil cloth. The benches ranged on either side lacked backs. The china was of a thickness suggesting immunity to breakage, though the frequent nicks proclaimed the vanity of that hope. Peggy ate her oatmeal with the growing conviction that the romance of her new venture was overshadowed by a distinctly prosaic side.

The proximity of Mag Whipple helped to confirm that impression. It was clear that Mag had never learned the A B C of table etiquette, either at home or in the daily lunch room, where she had been employed. She drank her coffee from the saucer and with a noisy gurgle. She scraped her plate till the girls at the end of the table looked to see what was happening, and then conveyed the remnant of a fried egg to her lips with the blade of her knife. Peggy blushed as rosily as if she herself had been guilty of this breach of propriety, while Priscilla, who sat at Peggy's left, arched her brows and bit her lip. It was insufferable that this ill-bred girl, the only one of her sort in the whole forty, should attach herself to Peggy. And if Peggy's gentleness prevented her from teaching Mag

Whipple her place, Priscilla resolved to take the responsibility on herself.

The activities of the day had been already determined, as different farmers in the vicinity had telephoned requests for workers in numbers ranging from two to twenty. Peggy and Amy were among a dozen girls assigned to the Hillcrest farm "to stick tomatoes." Peggy was a little disappointed in the nature of her first assignment. Though she had no idea what was implied by the term *sticking tomatoes*, it sounded tame and domestic, like making salad or preserves. And Peggy had not donned overalls for that.

Mrs. Lockwood, the matron, a woman whose snowy hair was in striking contrast with the youthful brilliancy of her dark eyes, came up to Peggy just as she was finishing her meal. "You are one of the new girls, aren't you? And you're going to the Hillcrest farm?"

"Yes, I believe so," said Peggy, thinking that she would not mind having her hair blanch in a night like Marie Antoinette's, if only it was as beautiful as this.

"Our work day is eight hours, but I should

advise you not to work more than four to start with."

Peggy looked surprised. "Do you mean that I'd get too tired? But I don't think I should. I'm really very strong."

Mag Whipple broke into a laugh, a very disagreeable laugh in Peggy's estimation. She felt that she was being made fun of, and her cheeks grew hot. "I'd rather work the full day, please," she said with dignity.

Mrs. Lockwood smiled. "It is new work, you know, and you will use muscles that are accustomed to having a rather easy time. If at the end of half a day you decide to stop, it will be all right."

Mag was still chuckling and though Peggy said no more, her lips tightened till the smile quite disappeared. It annoyed her that Mrs. Lockwood should think her a weakling who would have to lie off after four hours of work, while Mag's airs of superiority were more annoying still. Peggy made up her mind that the laugh would be on her side by dinner time.

The farmhouse hummed like a beehive as the girls fell to work. Beds were made in short

order. The heavy china was washed in a haste which would have proved fatal to more fragile ware. Some of the girls had been delegated to the household squad for the day and they went about their more familiar duties with an air of disappointment. Priscilla also looked disappointed. She was not going to the Hillcrest farm, but to another known as the Sweetwater farm.

"What are you going to do to-day?" asked Peggy as she folded her blanket, and laid it across the foot of her narrow cot, Priscilla performing the same operation at the next bed.

"Thin corn, whatever that is."

"Why, I suppose it means pulling out the extra shoots so there won't be too many on a hill." Peggy's manner betrayed her pride in the extent of her agricultural information, and Priscilla asked with becoming humility, "What are *you* going to do?"

"Stick tomatoes."

"What on earth is that?"

"Haven't the slightest idea." Peggy broke into helpless laughter at this prompt exposure of pretensions to be an agricultural expert and

Priscilla joined her. Probably never in its existence of nearly a hundred years had the old farmhouse echoed with more spontaneous laughter than now when it was the abiding-place of forty lively girls.

The girls were conveyed to the farms where they were to work in a small motor bus, and the Hillcrest delegation was the first to leave. The tall girl at the wheel looked over her shoulder as the dozen crowded in. "Any of you familiar with a Ford?"

No one responded.

"Anybody used to driving a car of any sort?"

There was a general shaking of heads, whereupon the driver fixed her eyes on Peggy.

"You come out and sit by me," she said. "And keep your eyes open. There's only one girl besides myself who can run this bus, and unless we break some of you in, there'll be trouble one of these days."

Peggy scrambled into the front seat, nothing loath. She had never been ambitious in the direction of learning to run a car. Indeed she had looked almost reverently on the girls she

had seen performing that feat and wondered how they dared. But that was in those far-off days before the war. Now, no girl with good red blood in her veins, would allow herself to feel that there was anything she could not do. The morning's ride took them through a very beautiful farming country, and the girls in the body of the bus, were continually exclaiming over some showy patch of wild flowers, or bright-plumaged bird. But Peggy saw nothing but the wheel and the skilful hands upon it, and the stretch of road ahead. Occasionally she asked a question which Marian Keith, the driver, answered with painstaking clearness.

The mysterious process called sticking tomatoes was not to remain a mystery long. At the farm the newcomers were put under the tutelage of a more experienced worker. To Peggy's regret this phase of her education was entrusted to Mag Whipple, who lost no chance to impress her pupil with her own greater information.

Sticking tomatoes proved not even distantly related to making salad. It only meant, as Peggy realized, with a feeling of disgust at

her own lack of imagination, sticking small tomato plants into the ground. You held several of them in your left hand, and in the right a tool quaintly named a dibble. With the dibble you scooped out a hole in the furrow running straight across the field, placed one of the tomato plants within and with the dibble patted down the earth about it.

After Peggy had painstakingly set out her first plant, Mag seized it by the stem and gave it what seemed a vindictive yank. Up it came, and Peggy's eyes widened in indignant remonstrance.

"That wouldn't do, you see," Mag explained. "You've got to get it in so it'll stand a pull. They're way behind the times on this farm," she added loftily, "sticking tomatoes like their grandfathers did. But as long as it ain't our funeral, we'll do it the way they say."

Peggy's second attempt was more successful, though Mag pleasantly assured her that she was slower than molasses in January. "By the time you got the last of that lot of tomatoes set out," she smiled, "the first would be ready to pick." And then as if perceiving a sugges-

tion of reluctance in Peggy's smile, she added consolingly, "I guess you'll learn sooner or later. You don't look as stupid as some."

Peggy was glad when her watchful instructor considered her sufficiently advanced to be left to herself. She toiled on patiently, realizing now that Mag was no longer present to be amused, that her awkwardness was really funny. The day had seemed fresh and delicious on the drive over, but to the girls sticking tomatoes, the sun appeared to have it all its own way, while the breeze had retired from business. The perspiration trickled off Peggy's chin and fell in salty drops on the young tomatoes.

At the intersection of two of the furrows, made for the guidance of the workers, Peggy fell in with Amy. After a glance at the crimson face under the broad-brimmed hat, she burst into a spontaneous laugh. "Oh, Amy, how red you are!"

"If I'm any redder than you are, Peggy Raymond, I must look like a tomato dead ripe."

"How are you getting along?" Peggy inquired casually.

"Pretty fair," returned Amy with equal casualness. "How are you?"

"Oh, all right. It—it's a little harder than I thought," owned Peggy.

"Gives you a queer feeling in the back, doesn't it," exclaimed Amy, becoming animated all at once.

"Yes, and in the knees."

"But I'm not going to give up after half a day," declared Amy positively.

"Nor I. Even if we do get a little tired, we'll have sixteen hours to rest in."

Refreshed and cheered by the chance encounter, the two friends parted company, following the guiding furrows, and for a little each plied her dibble with redoubled energy. But the queer feeling in the back on which Amy had commented and the stiffness in the knees of which Peggy had spoken, and various other uncomfortable sensations, became more pronounced moment by moment. When at intervals Peggy straightened and stood upright, she felt as if she were trying to open a pocket knife with rusty blades. Her muscles had lost their spring. She could sympathize with old people

who shuffled along the side walk, instead of moving lightly and buoyantly.

Peggy had discovered before that morning at the Hillcrest Farm that some hours are much longer than others. The hour one waits for a belated train seems to have at least one hundred and twenty minutes. Waiting for some anticipated pleasure has a tendency to make Father Time seem an extremely leisurely old gentleman. The longest hour of Peggy's life was the one when she had waited outside her mother's sick-room, while within the doctor and the white-robed nurse held conference for exactly sixty interminable minutes. But next to that, came the hours on the Hillcrest Farm. When Peggy saw that her wrist watch indicated ten o'clock she gave it a little indignant shake.

"That man warranted that watch," scolded Peggy. "Said it would keep time in the trenches or anywhere, and it's stopped the very first morning."

She held it to her ear and to her surprise the wrist-watch was ticking away merrily. Peggy decided that the hour hand must have caught. But when a big bell sounded the signal for the

noon rest, Peggy's watch indicated exactly twelve o'clock.

The farmerettes had brought a luncheon put up the night before and they partook of it picnic fashion sitting on a grassy knoll, under the genial shade of a spreading maple. Here Peggy found Amy, lying stretched on her back, presenting a more flattened appearance than one would have thought possible, considering her natural plumpness. "You look," declared Peggy rather unfeelingly, "exactly as if you'd been stepped on by an elephant."

Amy paid no attention to this gibe. "I'm down here," she observed, "and I don't expect to move until it is time to go home."

"You mean you're only going to work half a day?"

"I'm not going to work any more than I have, half a day or quarter of a day or a tenth of a day, it doesn't make a mite of difference." Amy spoke with reckless abandon, "And if you're not a goose, you'll do the same."

It is more than possible that Peggy would have acted on this eminently sensible suggestion, had she not at the moment caught the eye

of Mag Whipple. Mag wore her familiar superior smile. Her lips were parted and Peggy was sure they were about to utter the words, "I told you so." Peggy felt a thrill of determination running along her spine.

"No, indeed," she exclaimed lightly. "Of course one gets rather tired till one's used to it, but I'm going to work the full eight hours."

The shade and the sandwiches were a heavenly combination, and the farmer's wife added the final touch when she sent over a pail of deliciously cool milk, with mugs enough to go around. Most of the girls chatted and laughed as they ate, but the usually vivacious Peggy had not a word to say. She munched her sandwiches, sipped her milk, and for the first time in her life appreciated the luxury of food and rest.

She had worked just two hours of the four remaining, when she suddenly realized that she could not work one minute longer. The things that had seemed important all at once ceased to matter. Mag Whipple might laugh as much as she pleased. Peggy's resolution no longer seemed to herself heroic, but a piece of folly,

springing from a silly fear of what people might say.

Peggy staggered to the girl in charge and proffered her plea. The girl stared at her.

"New, and worked six hours!" she exclaimed. "Why, you should have stopped long ago. Now be careful not to take cold or you'll be so stiff in the morning that you can't get out of bed."

That evening after dinner, some of the girls changed to the dress-up bloomers. In the living room sounded the tinkle of mandolins, with much animated chatter, and occasionally a burst of song. But Peggy lay on her cot upstairs, oblivious to everything except the ache of her rebellious muscles and the joy of realizing that for her there could be no more sticking tomatoes for at least twelve golden hours.

CHAPTER V

A DAY AT BEECHWOOD

It was several days before Peggy recovered from the effect of her over-ambitious beginning. She was stiff and sore. Her knees were unwilling to bend, and her backbone, once bent, had difficulty in straightening out. She did her four hours' work a day, and found it enough and more than enough to satisfy her ardor. And then, just when she had made up her mind that the summer was going to be a hard fight from beginning to end, the stiffness, and the aches, and the twinges were all things of the past, and she woke one morning with her characteristic certainty that something pleasant was about to happen.

Priscilla and Amy, thanks to their sensible moderation at the start, had suffered less than Peggy, yet they had not been without the tweaking discomforts and the difficulty in stooping which seemed like a forerunner of old age.

But their unruly muscles, finding that nothing was to be gained by making themselves disagreeable, ceased to protest, and did their new duties as submissively as they had done the old. And then all three of the Friendly Terrace girls discovered that fun was perfectly compatible with plenty of hard work.

All three had speedily become favorites. Peggy, to whom making friends was as natural as breathing, won her way to the hearts of all as soon as she was sufficiently comfortable to be her usual sunny self. Amy's dry fun never failed on an appreciative laugh and perhaps she helped quite as much in this fashion as by her back-breaking toil, for where people are working to the limit of their strength, humor is a necessary lubricant, if friction is to be avoided. Finding that music was such a feature of their leisure, Priscilla sent home for her violin and there were few evenings when she was not called on to play some favorite selection.

In this household of forty well-bred and well-educated girls and young women, Mag Whipple remained an incongruous figure. Every one

treated her with painstaking and scrupulous politeness. As the girls had become acquainted, formality had promptly disappeared. Nicknames had come in vogue, and there was plenty of give and take in the way of good-natured banter. Amy's plumpness and her love for sweets occasioned as much good-humored teasing, as if she had been among girls she had known all her life. But nobody ever took any liberties with Mag Whipple.

Peggy was always distressed by the realization that somebody was being left out. "I don't think it's so much because she's different," she told Priscilla, "as because she has such a superior way toward everybody that wasn't born on a farm. It's just as if she were afraid that the other people were going to look down on her, and so she hurries up and gets ahead of them."

Priscilla was not interested in the workings of Mag Whipple's mind. "I think she's intolerable myself, and I'd be glad if she washed her hands of us and went back to her dairy lunch room. It makes me provoked when you encourage her to hang around, Peggy."

"Why, Priscilla, I don't. Sometimes I'm ashamed of myself for not treating her better."

"Heavens!" groaned Priscilla, and as a matter of fact, Peggy had nothing for which to reproach herself as far as Mag was concerned. In two-score girls, Peggy was the only one with whom Mag was on anything like friendly terms, but Peggy realized that this was largely her own fault. Her over-bearing, supercilious manner did not disappear as the others gained skill. Instead her contempt seemed to be increased by the reflection that they could hope to learn anything worth while about farm work in a single summer. "Look at me!" Mag would say pompously. "I was born on a farm, raised on a farm, lived on a farm till I was eighteen, and I don't know it all yet." But this closing admission was only for the sake of emphasizing Peggy's folly in hoping to learn anything of the subject in three or four months.

While the girls were becoming acquainted with one another, and the foundations for warm friendships were being laid, they were slowly getting acquainted on the neighboring farms. There were a number like the Hillcrest farm

where they were glad to go and were sure of courteous treatment. On other farms, their employers were exacting and inclined to find fault, and lost no chance to explain that the only reason they were hired was because there were no men available. The morning assignment to duty had all the excitement of a grab bag, for no girl knew till she heard her name called whether she would do her day's work under agreeable conditions or the reverse.

One morning, about two weeks after her arrival, Peggy and a young woman several years her senior were assigned to work at a country place five miles from the farm, the conditions being that they should be sent for and brought back at the conclusion of their day's work. After the jolting little bus, it seemed luxurious to lie back in a smooth-running automobile, and glide to their destination. Peggy confided to her companion that she had not felt less like a farmerette since she donned her uniform.

Alice Cameron laughed her agreement. She was a young woman of twenty-five who had been out of college two years and had made a modest start in journalism. At the outbreak of the

war, as she was desirous of serving her country in some more direct fashion than reporting social events, she had resigned her position and enlisted in the Land Army. The fact that she was a college graduate, and had the air of being well posted on every subject, frequently the result of even a short period of newspaper work, would have made her seem quite advanced in years, had Peggy made her acquaintance under other circumstances. But meeting as they had on a common level of interest and ignorance, they called each other Peggy and Alice as a matter of course.

Both of them had taken it for granted that at Beechwood they would set at work on one of the war gardens which had sprung up all over the country as part of America's answer to the challenge of the hour. But the extremely dignified lady who outlined their duties set them clipping the privet hedge, with the lawn and garden as further claimants for their attention. All had been sadly neglected, it is true, but Peggy had not consecrated her summer to cutting anybody's lawn, and her mood was rebellious. But if she was far from pleased, it

was evident that the matron who was directing her activities was equally dissatisfied.

"Of course it is not to be expected," she said resignedly, "that you will do the work satisfactorily, unskilled as you are, but we have reached a point where we must have some one. I don't know what the government is thinking of. Our gardener and our chauffeur as well, are both in the service. Fortunately we secured a chauffeur beyond the draft age, but so far we have been unable to find men for this work."

"Did you hear her!" Peggy exploded, when she had left them to themselves. "She seems to think that all the war matters is that she can't have as fine a garden as usual."

"I can't think where I've seen her before," Alice Cameron returned, irrelevantly. "Probably she has a town home, as well as a country place, and I may have described her costume when she wore point lace and diamonds. Anyway I've seen her before."

They fell to clipping the ragged hedge, talking as they worked, and Peggy's sense of dissatisfaction rapidly grew less, overshadowed

by the pleasure of this outdoor work amid green, growing things. Peggy's hands were getting scratched and calloused, as well as the color of tanned leather, and her finger nails, for all her care, were showing the effect of her unaccustomed toil. But every day now brought her such a sense of well-being that she wondered if she would not want to spend every summer of her life farming.

They had almost finished with the hedge when a young man came out of the house. He was dressed in white flannels and carried a bag of golf sticks. The chauffeur, evidently summoned from the house by telephone was in readiness, and alighting from the car, he took the bag from the young man's hand, and hurried to open the door of the automobile for him to enter.

But the young man was not quite ready for the automobile. His eyes ran along the hedge and he frowned. He would not have been good looking, even if he had given himself the advantage of a pleasant expression, Peggy thought, being altogether too plump and round, with yellow eye-lashes that looked white against

his pink skin. But when he frowned, he was distinctly ugly.

"Here you!" he exclaimed addressing Peggy, who happened to be the nearer of the two girls. "You haven't got that straight. Why don't they send help who know what they're about?"

The criticism would have disappointed Peggy even if it had been expressed more courteously, for she had been flattering herself that the hedge looked as if it had been manicured by professionals, instead of by two girls, undertaking the work for the first time. But the insolence of the speaker so aroused her indignation that she lost all interest in her work, and faced him with level, angry eyes.

"I suppose they sent us for the same reason you hired us," she said pointedly, "because there was nobody else."

"Upon my word!" said the young man, and as he stared at her, his frown was replaced by a smile hardly more prepossessing. Peggy was a pretty girl and flushed by indignation she looked prettier than usual. The young man with the light eye-lashes seemed to appreciate this fact.

"Oh, well," he said carelessly, "no need to fly off the handle. I suppose nowadays an employer hasn't even the right to say that those who work for him have done a bum job."

"I, for one, never expected to do work of this sort," said Peggy. "There are more important things just now than trimming hedges." Her earlier sense of injury returned in full force. "If our work isn't satisfactory," she added, "my friend and I are perfectly willing to stop right now."

The young man laughed, but though Peggy had spoken for her companion, he did not glance in Alice Cameron's direction. "I say," he asked teasingly, "do you always go around with a chip on your shoulder?" He seemed to have forgotten the hedge as completely as Peggy had done. And without waiting for her answer, he followed up his question by another, "What do you think of the life of a farmerette?"

"It isn't bad," said Peggy. "Not when people treat us politely and let us alone, so we can do our work." She turned her back on him and gave her attention to the slandered hedge. The young man went away laughing. As the

automobile door slammed to, Peggy lifted her eyes, and saw upon Alice Cameron's face an expression she did not understand, though it seemed to her sensitiveness to betoken disapproval.

"Alice," said Peggy a little nervously, "oughtn't I to have talked to him that way? It seemed to me he really needed to be snubbed."

"Peggy," exclaimed the older girl, ignoring the question, "don't you know who that is?"

"No, do you?"

"That's Bobby Fitz-Maurice. I knew I'd seen his mother in point lace and diamonds. Of course you know his father has a big government contract. But perhaps you don't know that Bobby, though he's of the draft age, won't be called to serve, because he's supposed to be essential to the business."

The automobile was now a distant moving speck on the level road. Peggy looked after it with a sharp, angry laugh. She was thinking of Graham and the risks he would run, of the possibility that he would never return. And Graham was typical of multitudes of others, from wealthy homes and from poor homes, all

wearing khaki together, all ready for service and suffering, perhaps for death. And Bobby Fitz-Maurice in his white flannels, had gone to play golf. She clipped away at the hedge savagely.

They ate their luncheon, sitting on a marble bench out in the rose garden, and when they were in the midst of it, a pretty maid with white cap and apron, brought them a delicious looking salad and some cake. She surveyed their costume with frank curiosity as she asked, "Is it really so bad?"

"What? The clothes?" inquired Peggy with a twinkle.

"No, the work. Doing the same kind of work men do."

"It's not bad a bit, not after you're used to it, anyway," added Peggy, with a remembrance of her days of sticking tomatoes.

"Sometimes," the maid said in a little confidential outburst, "I get tired of waiting on table and that kind of thing. I've got a brother that went up into Canada to enlist. He couldn't wait for us. And then for me to go on just the same—" She twisted her apron

and her pretty face worked as if she were on the point of crying.

They talked to her as they ate their salad. Her name was Ellen Goss. She was next to the oldest of a large family and her schooling had been limited, but whatever had been overlooked in Ellen's education, patriotism had not been left out.

"There's another thing I don't like about this place," said Ellen, leaving off twisting her apron, and flushing as she spoke. "All they seem to think about this war is that they'll have a chance to make some money. Mr. Robert ought to be in uniform, but he ain't. Sometimes when I've been waiting on the table and heard 'em talk, I've felt like taking off my apron, and telling 'em to wait on their own selves."

Alice, who was considerably better informed than Peggy regarding war activities for women, made some suggestions to which Ellen listened eagerly. And when she went back to the house with their empty dishes, the two girls exchanged glances.

"Ellen helps to even things up," Peggy said.

"She's got patriotism enough to go round the family."

The lawn was so large and the grass so long that the girls had agreed from the start that it would be impossible for them to do any work in the garden that day. Accordingly Peggy was rather surprised when they had finished luncheon to see Alice go to the small outbuilding where the garden tools were kept and reappear with spade and rake. "Didn't Mrs. Fitz-Maurice tell us to cut the grass before we did the garden?" she inquired.

"I'm doing this in my own time," Alice explained. "It's not for the Fitz-Maurices. It's just to please myself."

She fell to spading a flower bed, shaped like a crescent and at the end of the walk leading from the house to the garden. "Peggy," she said, over her shoulder, "in the tool house there's a box of seeds, vegetables and flowers both. Look it over and see if you can find an envelope marked carrots."

"Carrots!" repeated Peggy in amazement. "You're not going to plant carrots there, are you?"

Alice gave her an odd little smile. "That's exactly what I intend to do," she replied. "You know I said I wasn't doing this for the Fitz-Maurices."

Much perplexed Peggy went to the tool house and instituted a search in the box of seeds. She soon found the envelope marked carrots, but ornamented with a picture of that familiar vegetable calculated to awaken doubts as to the correctness of the label. And then feeling the contagion of Alice's energy, she found another spade and aided in the work.

"You don't need to spade very deep," explained Alice. "Suppose you take the rake and smooth off this end, while I finish the other. I don't want to spend too much time on this."

Peggy was glad to hear it. She had a feeling that things would not be altogether comfortable if Mrs. Fitz-Maurice came out to find them planting carrots in the flower bed which had so prominent a place in the garden.

When the spaded soil had been smoothed to her satisfaction, Alice took the rake and with it traced upon the surface a letter S, about two feet in height. Peggy, looking on in fascinated

interest, saw an L following the S and then an A. She uttered a gasp of understanding.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I see. But, Alice—"

Alice did not seem to hear her. She went on drawing the letters carefully with the handle of the rake till she had finished the word she had in mind. Then she stood back and looked at it with an air of proud satisfaction.

SLACKER

"Do you suppose they'll be able to read it from the house?" she inquired solicitously, as she began sprinkling the carrot seed in the furrows which formed the letters. "Nothing would make me happier than to think he'd look out of his window some morning and see this staring at him in big green letters. I'd like to have made them bigger, but I couldn't in a bed of this size."

"I think they'll be quite big enough to satisfy the Fitz-Maurices," replied Peggy, giggling a little nervously. "Do hurry, Alice, for if she comes out to see why the lawn mowers aren't running, we're lost."

The last of the carrot seed was deposited in the final letter of the obnoxious word, and then the girls sifted earth over the seeds, and pressed it down firmly with a board. This done they returned to their legitimate labors, and worked as rapidly as possible to make up for the half hour they had expended on the crescent-shaped flower bed. It was a particularly hard afternoon and Peggy's back was aching before five o'clock brought release, but tired as she was, every now and then she gave way to uncontrollable laughter as she pictured the astonishment of Mr. Robert Fitz-Maurice some bright morning, when just as he was about to start off for a game of golf, he discovered that even the green growth in his own garden had been given a voice to rebuke him.

CHAPTER VI

"WHAT'S IN A NAME?"

Peggy came back from her day at Beechwood so excited over the surprise in store for young Mr. Fitz-Maurice that she was half through her dinner before she discovered that Amy and Priscilla had something on their minds. Priscilla showed it characteristically by eating almost nothing. Amy who could be depended on to find something humorous in the most tiresome day and recount it in a fashion conducive to the general gaiety, was as silent as a sphinx, though she cleared her plate methodically. Peggy who had been doing more than her share of the talking, as an unconscious outlet for her overflowing spirits, lost the thread of the story she was telling when she realized that something was wrong with her friends.

It was some time before she had a chance to ask them about it. The girls took turns helping with the dinner dishes, and this was her

night to assist. Although the squad to which this duty was allotted was as large as the kitchen could accommodate conveniently, washing the dinner dishes for forty people is a task demanding time and patience. When Peggy had finished she was not surprised to find Amy and Priscilla seated on the stairs with that indefinable yet unmistakable air of waiting for somebody.

"Priscilla," called a voice from the living room just as Peggy made her appearance, "get your violin, won't you, and play the Humoresque. If I don't hear it at least once in twenty-four hours, I feel as if I'd gone without my dinner."

Priscilla's response to this flattering appeal confirmed Peggy's apprehensions. "Please, Judy," she said tonelessly, "wait till to-morrow. I'm not a bit in the mood for playing."

"Here's Peggy now," exclaimed Amy in a low, eager voice, and she heaved a sigh so expressive of relief that Peggy's curiosity deepened to real concern. As if it had been arranged beforehand, the three girls walked through the hall, crossed the porch, and went

down the steps into the dewy grass. Priscilla took possession of one of Peggy's arms and Amy of the other.

It was not necessary for Peggy to ask any questions. "Oh, dear," Priscilla exclaimed, squeezing the arm she held, "we've got the queerest thing to tell you."

"We've been keeping it ever since half past five," Amy put in, "and it's a wonder we haven't exploded."

"Don't talk as if it were a joke, Amy," protested Priscilla a little sharply, "for it's a serious matter."

"Well, I should think it was pretty serious if I exploded," declared Amy, defending herself. But Priscilla paid no attention.

"We've found out something about somebody here, Peggy. And we don't know what we ought to do, whether we ought to keep it to ourselves or not. We think—"

Apparently Amy felt that Priscilla was too deliberate in getting to the point. She broke in deftly, "We think we've discovered a German spy."

"What!" screamed Peggy.

"Sh! We don't want anyone to know—unless it's something we ought to tell. Come a little further from the house so we'll be sure nobody's listening."

They started on a run down the slope that led to the orchard.

When it was quite certain that they had no audience except the fireflies and crickets, they came to a halt and all three were breathing fast.

"Well," Peggy prompted. "Nobody can hear us now. Go on."

Priscilla took up the story. "The way it happened was this, Peggy. You heard them say at dinner that on the way home to-night something went wrong with the bus. Marian couldn't make it move an inch. She got out and began to tinker with it and most of the girls waited to see if she could get it started, but we were only about half a mile from the house, and Amy and I thought we would walk along. One other girl came with us, Edith Brinton. Peggy, you remember her, don't you?"

"That's the girl with very light hair, isn't it, and a nice voice? I've never talked with her

a great deal, but I thought she seemed pleasant."

"Yes, she *seems* nice," Priscilla said darkly. "The question is, is she what she seems or not?"

"Wait," Amy cried, seeing that Peggy was about to speak. "You won't understand till you have heard the rest of it, Peggy. We didn't hurry on our way home, because we thought at any minute Marian might get the bus started and catch up with us. So we strolled along, taking things easy. Edith was picking flowers, so she got quite a little way behind us. Just as we got to that pretty little lane with the locust trees, an automobile passed us, going in the opposite direction. It was full of people, and though we didn't think of it at the time, when we talked it over afterward, we realized that they all had a German look. Well, the car passed us, but just as it got to Edith it stopped. One of the women called out, 'Why, Minna' something-or-other. It sounded like Eichenberger."

"And it certainly didn't sound a bit like Edith Brinton," corroborated Priscilla.

"Oh, I should say not. It might not have been Eichenberger but it was one of those long German names that fill your mouth so full that there isn't room for another syllable. And then if that wasn't enough to make anybody suspicious," continued Amy, "the way she acted afterward would have settled it."

"I only wish you could have seen her face, Peggy," Priscilla cried. "Of course we couldn't hear a word of what was said, but they talked for quite a little while. Amy and I walked on, but though we were so far ahead, she caught up with us and the first thing she said was that the people in the car had stopped her because they wanted to know the way to Laurelton."

"She was as red as a beet when she told us that," observed Amy. "You couldn't wonder, either."

Peggy hesitated. She had the characteristic American reluctance to believe in plots and plotters, and moreover she failed to see anything in the simple community life at the Poplars, worthy a spy's attention. "But if she

was anything like that," she protested, "what would she be doing here?"

"No telling. She might poison us all some fine day," suggested Amy cheerfully.

"She might think she could pick up some information worth while," said Priscilla. "Half the girls here have brothers or friends in the service. They say that nothing is too big for those spies to try, and nothing is too small to bother with."

But Peggy's conviction that a bona fide spy would be wasting her time at the Poplars remained unaltered. She cast about for some less disturbing explanation of the story to which she had listened. "Perhaps they called to her, thinking they knew her, and when she came up, they saw they were mistaken. A girl's own mother might not know her in a farmerette rig."

"But they talked quite a long time, Peggy, and not a bit as if they were asking the direction somewhere."

"They might have been asking about the work we are doing. I've had people stop me

and ask any number of questions. It's so new that everybody's interested."

"If that was all," objected Priscilla, seemingly a little vexed to find Peggy so hard to convince, "I don't know why she should have looked so red and confused, when she caught up with us."

"The redness is easy enough to understand. You said you were quite a way ahead and she must have hurried. And as long as you felt suspicious, Priscilla, it was easy enough for you to imagine she seemed confused, too."

There was a moment's silence. Then Priscilla said, a vague disappointment in her tone, "Then you think we'd better not tell Mrs. Lockwood, or anybody."

Peggy did not hesitate. "Mrs. Lockwood would be the one to speak to, of course, if you had reason to be suspicious about anybody, but to tell the truth, Priscilla, I can't see that there's anything to tell. You thought you heard Edith called by a different name from the one she goes by, but there are so many ways of explaining such a thing, that I can't see it's worth making a fuss about." With an effect of turning to

something more interesting, she added, "Now listen, while I tell you what happened at Beechwood to-day."

If Amy and Priscilla had a sense of disappointment over Peggy's reception of the news which had seemed to them so important, they were too generous to retaliate in kind. They waxed indignant over young Mr. Fitz-Maurice's lack of patriotism, and shouted joyfully over the novel rebuke in store for him. As they strolled back to the farmhouse nothing in their manner suggested the dark suspicions which accounted for their absenting themselves, and a fair-complexioned girl who saw them enter, dropped her eyes with an expression of relief.

On the warmer nights the girls sat on the broad porch, but this particular evening was cool enough for the big living-room, made equal to accommodating Mrs. Lockwood's large family by knocking out a partition. It was the only room in the house in which any concession had been made to the artistic, for the bedrooms and the dining-room were furnished with a severe practicality, almost grim in its effect. In the living-room, however, there were several grass

rugs on the painted floor, and a couch, with a cheerful striped cover, broke a rather formidable stretch of wall. Thanks to one of the women interested in the project, several pictures, loaned from her own apartment, added a homelike touch. Almost every day some of the girls brought flowers from the farms where they had worked, and all available jugs and bottles had been pressed into service as vases. In the evenings, at least, when every chair and stool was occupied, and the late comers sat on the floors, knitting, or took refuge on the broad window sills, or perched on the arm of some chair strong enough to carry double, the big room did not lack attractiveness.

The Friendly Terrace girls, last of all to join the company, were welcomed cordially. Amy was at once invited to hold a skein of yarn for a girl who promised to reciprocate when she should be in need of a like service. A high school senior, who had conceived a high admiration for Priscilla, moved to the very edge of the chair she occupied, that Priscilla might share it with her. And Peggy seating herself cross-legged on a rug, the corner of which no one had

preëmpted, was a little startled to discover herself shoulder to shoulder with the girl who called herself Edith Brinton, and who, if Amy and Priscilla had heard correctly, was sometimes called Minna Eichenberger.

Peggy had no wish to give any further thought to the matter she had so summarily settled as far as her two friends were concerned. But in spite of herself she found her thoughts centering on Edith. The fair-skinned, rather broad face, with its crown of light hair was, Peggy acknowledged, typically German. And once, as in conversation with the girl who sat on her right, Edith used the word "advice," Peggy gave a start and dropped a stitch. It had really seemed as if Edith had given that *v* a peculiar sound, more like a *w*. Peggy remembered a German friend of her mother's who would have passed for an American without difficulty, if it had not been for those troublesome *v*'s which were always tripping her up. She, too, would have said "adwice."

"Where did you work to-day?" asked Mag Whipple, crossing the room and seating herself beside her. Peggy welcomed this distraction to

her thoughts, but Priscilla who always resented Mag's assumption of being on friendly terms with Peggy, made no effort to conceal her displeasure.

Peggy described her day at Beechwood without mentioning that, in addition to her other activities, she had planted a few carrots. "Running the lawn mower is such hard work," she said.

"Hard!" Mag scoffed. "If you call that hard, I wonder what you're going to say when the haying season begins. And I'd like to see some of those wise guys making a load. I bet it would be lying on the ground, before it was half way to the barn."

"Why?" asked Peggy who was not above learning from disagreeable people. And with a marked air of condescension, Mag explained that a load of hay must be built evenly and substantially, to prevent slipping. Some of the other girls glanced curiously in her direction as she talked on, her voice unnecessarily loud and her frequent grammatical slips jarring on the ear, but the conversation remained a dialogue. No one else made any effort to join in it.

The evenings at the Poplars were cut short except on Saturdays, for the hard, unaccustomed work made a long night's rest necessary, and half past five came too early for an ordinary bed-time. The girls had begun to roll up their knitting, preparatory to going to bed, when somebody started, "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia." The others joined with a will, coming out strong in the chorus. Peggy noticed with admiration the quality of Edith Brinton's voice, clear and sweet as the notes of a bird.

One favorite followed another, and then as a signal that it was time for good night, Marian Keith, who in many ways was a leader among them, started "America," and every girl stood up. The spirit that accounted for their presence on the farm, and for the work they were doing, their loyalty and youthful ardor and their passion to serve, all found voices in the song. Even Matilda, the cook, a person of extreme placidity set the kitchen door ajar to listen.

In the middle of the second verse Peggy made a discovery, Edith Brinton was not singing. Peggy stole a glance at her and found her looking fixedly at the floor, her expression singu-

larly baffling to the girl who watched her. And her eyes were full of tears.

Peggy went to bed in a thoughtful mood. Though she was not ready to admit that she had taken too much on herself in deciding the question which was agitating Amy and Priscilla, she had begun to appreciate a fact she had not realized earlier, that in making that decision she had undertaken something of a responsibility. And it may have been that realization which kept her from falling asleep until she had quieted her uneasiness by the resolve that for a time at least, she would keep a watchful eye on the activities of Edith Brinton.

CHAPTER VII

PEGGY SETS A BALL ROLLING

The very best part of being young is the possibility of enjoying one's self under the most adverse circumstances. The girls at the Poplars knew that a terrible war was raging, and that in all probability, grief and heartache were in store for some of them. They were doing harder work than they had ever done in their lives, and at the same time were living without many of the comforts to which they were accustomed. But instead of being despondent or even grimly determined, they were for the most part as frolicsome as kittens.

Peggy, whose rhyming facility had stood her in good stead on a number of occasions, prepared a little surprise for one of the impromptu concerts which were such enjoyable features of their scant leisure. The day she selected chanced to be the most sultry of the season so

far, and the girls had come home warm and wilted and had recourse to the shower-baths which were one of the few luxuries permitted in their rather Spartan existence. Their appetites for dinner had not been quite up to the mark and perhaps they were a shade quieter than usual when at the conclusion of the meal they betook themselves to the broad porch, which promised as much coolness as could be found anywhere.

"Oh, dear!" Amy who had brought out a khaki-colored sweater, nearly finished, looked down at it with an expression of loathing. "Can you imagine anybody's ever wearing such a thing, and calling it comfortable? I don't mind knitting in the middle of winter, but in summer it seems such a waste of energy."

"But you know it's going to be cold again," remonstrated Maud Elting, a girl of such literal mind that she lived in a state of continual bewilderment over other people's vagaries.

"Perhaps it will," replied Amy, her tone implying doubt. "But I can't be sure of it when the thermometer is ninety-eight in the shade. Oh, what's going to happen now?"

Four girls had arisen and grouped themselves in an angle of the porch where they could easily be seen. The leader, humming softly, gave the key, and then the four voices blended in the strains of a popular air, wedded to words which, as the listeners at once realized, were both new and possessed of a personal application.

"Oh, the days are long and dreary,
And the sun is hot and high,
And we often get so weary
That it seems as if we'd die.
But we keep right on a-working;
Not a one will sham or lag,
Not a soul will dream of shirking
When we're fighting for our flag."

A joyful shout went up. Instantly the tired faces were all smiles, and the prolonged applause indicated that no matter how hard the girls had worked that sultry day, they had plenty of energy left. So persistent was the applause indeed, that the leader of the quartet remonstrated.

"Say, listen, are you clapping because you like it, or because you don't want to hear the rest?"

"Oh, is there more? We didn't know. Go ahead." And the laughing audience composed itself to listen.

"Now our brothers are in training
And their work is ours to do,
Without whining or complaining
We will put the contract through.
Hunger's armies will be routed,
Dawn will follow darkest night.
Who of us has feared or doubted
That we're fighting for the right?"

An author of more reputation than Peggy would have been gratified at the reception accorded her modest effort, for when Myra Collins, the leader of the quartet, remarked briefly, "You can clap as long as you like now, for that's all," the girls were quick to take advantage of her permission. And when there was a general demand for an encore, Peggy's pleased blush would have betrayed her, if any one had happened to be looking her way.

"I think those words are as clever as they can be," cried Marian Keith, whose approval Peggy especially valued because of her admira-

tion for the girl herself. "Did you write them, Myra?"

"Me? Heavens, no! It was Peggy Raymond."

Half a dozen voices repeated the name. Marian turned with a smile that deepened the pink in Peggy's cheeks, and Maud Elting exclaimed in a tone betraying how deeply she was impressed, "I didn't know you wrote poetry, Peggy!"

"I don't," laughed Peggy. "But I do write a good many jingles. Any of you can do it, after you get the knack."

"I think that's just as good as some of the war songs that are published," exclaimed another admirer.

Remembering the doggerel to which a mistaken patriotism had given birth, Peggy accepted this compliment without protest, and then turned inquiringly toward a group of girls who had put their heads together and were whispering and giggling over some mysterious undertaking.

"Don't mind us," cried one of them, for more eyes than Peggy's were turning in their direc-

tion. "We'll let you know as soon as we are ready. But we don't mean that Peggy Raymond shall carry off all the laurels."

"I believe they're composing a song," exclaimed Priscilla. "Poems written while you wait."

"I know I shall love it," said Amy. "I always thought the muffins they bake in the windows of restaurants would taste better for being made right under your eyes."

"Get a pencil, somebody," cried Laura Kendall, evidently the leading spirit in the cooperative song. "I think we've almost finished."

Pencil and paper were forthcoming, and in a surprisingly short time, the proud authors were ready to render their song, "hot from the griddle," as Amy remarked admiringly.

"We've been working in the corn fields
All the livelong day.
We've been working in the corn fields
As the hours slipped away,
Don't you hear the 'larm a-ringing
So early in the morn?
Don't you hear the farmers singing
Come out and thin my corn?"

When the applause and laughter called out by this masterpiece had died down, Amy announced that two automobiles were stopping in the road. "It makes me feel like going out and passing the hat," she said. "It isn't fair that they should have this beautiful concert for nothing."

Peggy looked up, her eyes bright with reminiscence. "Wouldn't it be fun to give an entertainment and make some money for the Red Cross, the way we did for Lucy Haines that summer?"

"Who was Lucy Haines?" somebody asked, and Peggy told the story of the ambitious girl who had come so near losing heart, and how the quartette from Friendly Terrace, with a little outside aid, had given her the start she needed.

"We made over forty dollars by that entertainment," Peggy ended. And for a moment the faces of the listening girls were only a blur, and she saw instead Lucy's wet eyes, looking up at her with a smile of happy gratitude shining through the tears.

"Forty dollars," repeated Marian Keith

thoughtfully. "I wonder if we could make as much."

"More!" Peggy declared. "In the first place we could charge more for admission, because the people around here are used to paying bigger prices, and then everybody is interested in the farmerettes and would be willing to pay for a nearer view of the critters. The trouble is," she added cheerily, checking herself as she realized that her enthusiasm was in danger of running away with her, "that we're all too busy to try anything like that."

But the idea so casually suggested had caught the girls' fancy. "I tell you what would take like the measles," exclaimed Laura Kendall. "Make it a musical comedy, based on the experiences of a lot of farmerettes. Why, we'd coin money!"

"That's great, Laura," Marian Keith declared. "We wouldn't compose the music of course, just take any old air we wanted, and write the words to fit it. Peggy here, could do two or three a day, and stick tomatoes at the same time."

"Peggy! You talk as if Peggy was the only

one who could write songs. I want you to know I'm quite a little poet myself," protested Laura with an air of mock injury.

"If we could have it outdoors at some big country place," exclaimed another, "it would draw like anything. People would come out from the city, you know."

Since she had set this ball rolling, Peggy essayed to stop it, not realizing the momentum it had gained in a very few minutes. "But, girls," she remonstrated, "if you've ever done anything of this sort you know what a lot of work it takes, and we're working already just about the limit."

"They say a change of work is a rest, you know," Alice Cameron reminded her.

"We could practice in the evenings," urged Marian, "and on rainy days. We're bound to have some rainy days soon, Peggy."

"It doesn't seem to me it would be such hard work," exclaimed Priscilla. "Of course the libretto, or whatever you call it, has to be written, but the audience won't see the words, they'll just hear them, and it won't matter if the meter is rather limpy."

"Yes," cried Myra Collins, "and a good share of the work connected with such things is getting the costumes ready, and we'll go in the togs we've made hay in. The dirtier and shabbier we look the better."

With a thrill of joy, Peggy realized that the current was too strong for her. She had protested as in duty bound, but all the time she had been arguing against her inclination. "All right," she cried buoyantly. "I'm ready if the rest of you are. But if you get sick of it, don't say I didn't warn you."

The girls lost no time. Before the nine o'clock gong sounded its warning note, everything had been settled. Marian Keith, chosen chairman of the impromptu meeting, had appointed Peggy to prepare a libretto, with liberty to select her assistants. Priscilla was named leader of the "orchestra," an honor which like many another, carried a rather heavy responsibility with it. To Alice Cameron was assigned the duty of finding a suitable place for giving the entertainment and advertising it as its excellence deserved.

"Miss Chairman," said an eager voice,

"there's a country place near here called Beechwood that would be just ideal for such a thing. The grounds run back to a hill that makes a natural amphitheatre. . . ."

"Miss Cameron will be glad of the suggestion I'm sure," the presiding officer replied with dignity. And Peggy, who had started nervously, bit her lips to keep back a laugh. She was very sure that since Alice had the matter in charge, the entertainment would be given anywhere but at Beechwood.

"Who said it had been a warm day," someone laughed when the brazen notes of the gong brought about adjournment. And indeed, nothing in the manner of the girls as they swarmed indoors indicated that the day had been hard and that the night was still hot. Peggy, contrasting their animated chatter with the rather lifeless way they had drifted out upon the porch after dinner, decided that the scheme for which she was responsible, was less crazy than it seemed. After all, was there a better way of rising above one's discomforts than having something better to think about?

"I knew it would be this way," said a voice in

her ear, and Peggy turning, saw Mag Whipple, her usual air of superiority more pronounced than ever.

"You knew— I don't quite understand."

"They're so sick of farming now that they jump at this sort of thing. Whoever heard of farmers mixing up work and play that way?"

"Perhaps if they mixed it a little oftener," suggested Peggy, "more young folks would stay on the farms."

Mag ignored the suggestion. "And the next thing you know they'll be quitting, finding some excuse to go back home. That's the kind they are."

Peggy did not reply, partly because she realized the uselessness of arguing with Mag, and partly because she was thinking of something else. The task that had been assigned her had caught her fancy and already ideas were crowding into her head. She talked them over with Priscilla as they hastily made ready for bed, for loitering over one's toilet at either end of the day, was frowned upon at the Poplars.

"I'm going to have one of my characters one of the silly frivolous sort, you know, who gives

up pink teas for the festive pitch-fork. I'll have her introduce herself like this." Peggy began humming as she shook down her hair.

"I'm a butterfly of fashion, I'm the season's reigning belle.
Or perhaps I'd better say I used to be.
But the change I have experienced, I have no need to tell,
For you can see, you all can see."

Priscilla regarded her in amazement. "Why, Peggy, when did you have time to think that up?"

"Oh, out on the porch. It's just a start, of course, but you see what the idea is. And then I'm going to have somebody who's awfully interested in suffrage and is so pleased at wearing overalls and doing men's work. I'll write a song for her that begins, 'I've Got My Rights at Last,' or something like that."

"I'll tell you a good character, Peg," exclaimed Priscilla, as if her friend's inventiveness had stimulated her own. "Have a college girl and make her use the longest words you can find in the dictionary. Of course col-

lege girls aren't a bit like that, but people think they are, and it'll make them laugh."

"Yes, and we'll have her wear her cap and gown along with her overalls," Peggy agreed joyously, and then scrambled for bed, as the signal sounded for lights out.

But going to bed did not necessarily mean going to sleep. Every creative worker sooner or later encounters the temptation to do night work. Peggy's brain was swarming with ideas and she had an unreasonable feeling that if she turned a deaf ear to them now, they might refuse to present themselves when wanted. She began to piece together the fragments of a plot which had occurred to her, making them into a connected story. She noticed with surprise that the longer she stayed in bed, the more wide-awake she felt. Her flesh was feverishly hot, and a pulse in her temple throbbed disconcertingly. Peggy finally arranged the plot to her satisfaction, and began mentally to assign the various rôles to girls who seemed adapted to them. The farmer puzzled her. She wanted somebody big and imposing, somebody on the order of Mag Whipple, though of course, Mag

couldn't act. Peggy wondered, if it would do to incorporate some of Mag's expressions into the farmer's speeches. On the whole she thought it would be safer not.

The crowing of a cock, his challenge instantly answered by a rival as brazen of voice, gave Peggy an uncomfortable half minute. Could it be anywhere near morning? Then she decided that some feathered alarm clock had gone off at the wrong hour, and turned back to the farmer's opening song. She remembered that she wanted a rhyme for "fuss."

"Peggy Raymond," came a plaintive whisper from the next cot, "are you sick or what *does* ail you? You've tossed and turned this livelong night, and I haven't shut my eyes."

"Oh, Priscilla, I'm sorry," Peggy whispered back. And then she took herself in hand and did what she should have done several hours earlier. Sternly she turned away from these clamorous children of her brain and began on the multiplication table. Somewhere up among the nineties she lost herself, but even then, to dream that they were giving the entertainment and young Mr. Fitz-Maurice rose and

made a scene because the word "slacker" occurred in one of the songs.

It was a very tired, head-achy and stupid Peggy who heeded the summons of the rising gong next morning. And she decided that while genius may take advantage of midnight inspiration, ordinary people with work to claim their attention, will do better for a good night's sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

SETTLING A QUESTION

The ball Peggy had started rolled very rapidly. "The best way is to rush the thing through while we are in the mood for it," Marian Keith said wisely. "If we keep rehearsing and try to make it a finished production, instead of something off-hand, it'll get to be a bore, and we'll be deadly sick of it before it comes off."

Though the weather continued extremely warm the antics of the thermometer failed to affect the girls' interest. Peggy found her duties unexpectedly light, for after the others had heard the outline of her plot, hardly a day passed when some one did not have a bright idea to suggest. Many of the songs, as well, were coöperative affairs. And especially when they parodied the words of some familiar favorite, composition proceeded with a rapidity which led Amy to dub them the "lightning

brand." Rehearsals, too, were cheerfully informal and served the double purpose of entertainment and preparation.

Of course the girls with the best voices were selected for the star rôles, and inevitably Edith Brinton was suggested for one of the leading parts. Peggy wondered if she were growing suspicious when Edith's reluctance to accept the honor seemed to her due to something besides modesty. A serious scruple held her back from urging Edith to change her mind, but the other girls did not share her feelings or even guess them. And between cajolery and downright bullying, Edith was at length brought to terms. The part assigned her was that of a highly patriotic maiden who when her companions are on the point of quitting after a day in the hay fields, sings a stirring appeal that revives their ardor. Secretly Peggy wished that Edith had been given any other part. At the conclusion of the performance she was to sing the Star Spangled Banner, and if she were not heart and soul a patriot, that seemed to Peggy little short of sacrilege.

The most difficult rôle to fill had been that of

the farmer and when Peggy suggested that Mag Whipple looked the part, Marian surprised her by immediate agreement. "She does. She's perfect. Ask her if she'll take it."

"But I don't know that she can act at all."

"She won't have to. She'll only need to be natural."

"But she can't sing."

"Give her a speaking part. Her voice is just exactly right, Peggy. Nobody here could bluster in her style. Can't we have a luncheon scene and have her use her knife instead of her fork."

Peggy felt a sudden qualm. "We mustn't ask her to help us, Marian, and then make fun of her. That wouldn't be fair."

"I only said that to show how she'd fit into the part," Marian laughed. "She'll do it, all right, Peggy. She isn't a bit timid."

"Timid!" Peggy repeated. "No, she's anything but timid, but I'm not sure she'll do it. She rather looks down on this whole affair as just what might be expected of girls of our sort. But if you really think she'll do, I'll ask her."

Mag's manner of receiving the invitation was a complete surprise. She looked at Peggy with a rather disagreeable smile. "You'll get yourself into hot water," she said roughly, "if you're not careful."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Those girls would raise the roof if they knew you'd asked me. They're so stuck on themselves that they'd think it was an awful thing for me to be in their old show."

"You're very much mistaken," Peggy replied with dignity. "They told me to ask you."

"Who did?"

"Well, Marian Keith, for one."

Mag's expression changed. For the first time since Peggy had known her, she lost her air of assurance.

"Did she honest, Peggy?"

"Of course. Do you suppose I'd say so if it wasn't true."

Mag stood biting her lips. In her doubt and irresolution she seemed a different girl.

"Do you suppose I could do it, Peggy? I don't want to make a fool of myself."

"It's a funny part, Mag. In a way we'll all make fools of ourselves. We'll try to be ridiculous and amuse people. The important thing is not to think about yourself and the impression you're making, but just be natural. Now here's the part, if you care to try it."

"I'll do the best I can," Mag replied, still with that unnatural meekness which made Peggy feel as if some one else were speaking. "And you can tell me what's wrong."

Alice Cameron, as well as Peggy, found the task which had been assigned her simpler than she had anticipated. A handsome country place about a mile from the Poplars, had a fine lawn sloping away from the house to a clump of shrubbery which would make an ideal background for the performance. With many misgivings Alice called on the owner of the place, Mrs. Sylvester, and explained what the girls were trying to do. To her delight Mrs. Sylvester obligingly agreed to give the use of her grounds, and do everything in her power to make the performance a success. Two weeks from the following Saturday was selected as a date convenient for all concerned, and the girls

who had friends or relatives living near began to send special deliveries, urging them to attend.

Peggy's first serious qualms were due to learning that the price of admission had been fixed at a dollar. "A dollar! It isn't worth it. When I think how many of those songs I've turned out, it seems like a swindle making people pay such a price to hear them."

Priscilla, to whom she made her plaint, scoffed at Peggy's scruples. "People don't pay a dollar to hear good poetry, they pay to be amused. And really, Peggy, I think it's going to be awfully funny. And anyway it's for the Red Cross."

On the Monday before the eventful Saturday, nature came to the girls' assistance with two days of such uninterrupted rain that outside work was impossible. Rehearsing went on almost continually. Regardless of dampness, the big porch became a stage, on which the girls marched and danced and sang. It was on the second afternoon that Edith Brinton again awakened Peggy's suspicions, for in the climax of the first act, when she was supposed to put

heart into her flagging comrades, by her stirring appeal, she forgot her lines.

Priscilla who was playing the part of orchestra all by herself, had no choice but to stop, when Edith broke off and looked about her in confusion. "Go on," said Peggy impatiently.

"I—why, I've forgotten."

"Haven't you the lines with you?" And her tones betrayed irritation.

"No, I haven't. I thought I'd learned them perfectly and I threw the paper away."

Peggy bit her lips. It had been a great deal of work to write out the lines for each performer, besides her own copy. "I advise you to keep the next one," she said dryly, "and if you forget, don't stop, hum something—anything—till you remember."

"Yes, I will," Edith promised humbly. She had succeeded by now in recalling the line that had slipped her memory, and she made another start, but either because of her embarrassment, or for some less obvious reason, the effect was anything but spirited, and Peggy's expressive countenance showed her dissatisfaction.

A most unpleasant thought had occurred to

her. What if Edith should repeat her blunder on the night of the entertainment. If she were really masquerading, hiding disloyalty under an assumed name, she might not think it beneath her notice to make this little entertainment a failure.

"And it's all my fault," Peggy assured herself. "If it hadn't been for me, the girls would have told Mrs. Lockwood what they overheard and then we'd know what she is and who she is. And I'm going to find out. I won't run any chance of having her spoil anything on purpose."

The next day, as it happened, Peggy and Edith were among the girls assigned to the prosaic job of weeding onions at the Hillcrest farm.

Peggy made a point of keeping close to Edith, and watched for a moment when the other workers should be out of ear-shot. Her opportunity was so long in coming that she began to think she would have to try some other plan, but just as she had reached that conclusion, the girl who had been working beside her rose and moved away. Peggy and Edith were

left alone with only a few rows of onions between them.

Peggy waited until she was sure of being able to keep the excitement out of her voice. "Miss Eichenberger," she said at last, in conversational tones.

"Yes?" Edith looked up inquiringly. There was a little smile on her lips as her gaze met Peggy's. Slowly the smile faded and understanding came into her eyes, understanding and a sort of dread.

She made an effort to rally. "Did—were you speaking to me?"

"I was speaking to Minna Eichenberger," Peggy said grimly.

"Oh!" She seemed to be considering whether to affect ignorance or to brave it out. As if realizing the futility of the former tactics, she weeded savagely for a moment before she said, "I suppose they've been telling everybody."

"No, they haven't," Peggy replied. She was not sure whether she was pulling up weeds or onions. "That's my fault, though," she explained. "If it hadn't been for me, they'd

surely have told the one who ought to know."

"And who's that?"

"Mrs. Lockwood, of course. If one of us has one name here and another at home, Mrs. Lockwood has a right to know about it."

She noticed that Edith's hands were trembling and she checked herself. Whatever Minna Eichenberger's motive might have been in calling herself Edith Brinton, the sight of those shaking hands made Peggy very uncomfortable. She fixed her eyes upon the weeds to avoid the unpleasant spectacle, and then a faint voice said, "Do you mean you wouldn't let—them tell about me?"

"Yes. At the time I didn't realize how serious it was. I thought those people might have made a mistake."

The girl on the other side of the rows of onions lifted her head. "They weren't mistaken," she said. "I am Minna Eichenberger."

"So I see."

"But—but I wanted to do something to help. And when I told my name, it seemed to me people always looked queer, as if they wondered—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Peggy. She looked across the onions, and something in her face seemed to encourage the other to go on.

"You couldn't blame them, could you? They'd heard such stories. Even the Red Cross bandages. You heard about them, I guess. But that didn't make it any easier to have them look at you and think things. Besides, I *was* born in Germany."

"Oh, were you?" murmured Peggy. But now her tone was pitying.

"I wasn't very old when we came away," the girl went on, still with that strange passion in her voice. "I can't even remember it. And America is my country and I love it just as much as you do. And when this war came, I just had to do something."

"But I can't see," remonstrated Peggy, "why you didn't use your own name. Why, lots of good Americans have German names, and everybody knows they're just as loyal as the rest of us."

The other girl was crying softly. "I see now I was foolish," she said. "But I'd offered to do one or two things and it seemed to me that

when people heard my name, they looked as if they were afraid to trust me. Anyway, there was always a reason why they didn't want my help just then. When I came here, I made up my mind that I'd have a name that sounded one hundred per cent American. And then those dreadful people—"

"Did they do it on purpose?" Peggy exclaimed.

"Why, no, they couldn't have." The girl laughed a little at her own unreasonableness. "You see my home is in the western part of the state and I never dreamed of seeing anybody I knew. But those people are neighbors of ours, and they were taking a tour in their machine and they happened to run across me. Wasn't it the worst luck?"

"Dreadful!" agreed Peggy, and there was no reservation in her sympathy. If in the beginning she had momentarily wondered if Minna Eichenberger were playing a part with her, that doubt had vanished at the sight of the girl's tears. She meant every word. And it was not difficult for Peggy to see how a person of very sensitive nature, loyal to the core, might

be betrayed into the folly of which this girl was guilty.

Now that her apprehensions regarding Minna Eichenberger had been set at rest, Peggy finished her day's work in high spirits and went back to the Poplars resolved to take an early opportunity to tell Priscilla and Amy all about it. Alice Cameron had been assigned to kitchen duty for the day—"K.P." the girls called the unfortunates who pared vegetables and did other tame and domestic duties, instead of working in the open. But it was not the tediousness of her duties as a K.P., Peggy was sure, which accounted for the expression on Alice's face, when she encountered her in the hall. "Anything wrong?" she asked with an anxious recollection of the nearness of Saturday.

"Well, something's happened. Can you come outside a minute?"

"Might as well. Doesn't look as if my chance to get to one of those showers was very good at present."

The two stepped out upon the porch, and Peggy took the letter her friend extended. As

she opened it she noticed approvingly the quality of the stationery and the artistic monogram. "You must have aristocratic correspondents," she said blithely.

"Oh, very," Alice sniffed. "Go on, Peggy, read it aloud." And rather slowly, for the striking hand which made such a good appearance on the page was hard to read, Peggy complied.

"My dear Miss Cameron:—

"It is with very great regret that I inform you that it will be impossible for me to have your entertainment at my place Saturday as I had planned. My husband came home from the city yesterday in a state of complete collapse. The condition of his nerves is such it will be necessary for him to be kept very quiet for some time.

"I am happy to tell you, however, that I have made arrangements so you will be spared all inconvenience. My friend, Mrs. Fitz-Maurice, has agreed to have the entertainment at her place, Beechwood—"

Peggy broke off her reading and lifted a pair of very round eyes. "Beechwood!" she gasped.

"Yes," groaned Alice. "Talk about poetic justice! But read the rest, Peggy."

Peggy found her place with a little difficulty. "Um! Where was I? Oh, yes?"

"—at her place, Beechwood, which is, if anything, better suited than mine for such an affair. I telephoned the carpenters who are to put up the platform, and they will begin work at Beechwood to-morrow morning. I will also see that notices are posted in the railway station, and at the village post office, calling attention to the change of place, and I am hopeful that your entertainment will in no way suffer from the change. With deep regret and every wish for your success,

"Very truly yours,
"ELINOR M. SYLVESTER."

Peggy folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. "What are we going to do?" she demanded.

"What can we do?" Alice parried.

"We might make an excuse to go to look the ground over and then dig up those carrot seeds."

"But they must have come up, Peggy, long ago."

"Oh!" Peggy stood motionless, knitting her brows. "But then I shouldn't think they'd have wanted us."

"Perhaps they're taking this way of showing that they're not slackers," Alice suggested.

"Perhaps. Or they might not have realized that we were the ones who did it."

"Or perhaps," said Alice hopefully, "some one of the servants pulled up the carrots when they showed above ground, so the family never knew."

Whatever the explanation, it seemed evident that the Fitz-Maurices bore no grudge, but Peggy was far from comfortable in her mind. "It makes you feel rather mean," she said uneasily, "to do a thing like that and then accept people's hospitality."

"All my fault," sighed Alice.

"Nothing of the sort. I was in it up to my ears and I thought he deserved it. But if I'd known we were going to ask a favor—"

Again they regarded each other ruefully, and seeing that Alice felt keenly the responsibility for the escapade, Peggy assumed an indifference she was far from feeling. "Oh, well," she laughed, "if they can stand it, I'm sure we can. And if I'm going to get in line for one of

those showers, I'd better not lose any more time." But as she went indoors, she was aware that her anticipations were no longer pleasant ones, and that she would be only too thankful when Saturday was over.

CHAPTER IX

AS ONE SOWS

The mistress of Beechwood had outdone herself. The grounds were a fairy land. Chinese lanterns hung on every shrub and tree, and the whole place was a blaze of light. The moon, arriving on schedule time, apparently prepared to do her full duty, seemed to take offense at the discovery that her services were not required, for she retired temporarily behind a cloud. Then finding that no one paid any attention to her sulking, she presently reappeared, smiling as brightly as ever.

The platform which was to serve as a stage was even more brilliantly lighted than the grounds, for electric wires had been run from the house to provide the necessary illumination. High up against the dark background of the leaves blazed a Red Cross, the world-wide symbol of help and mercy. And at the front edge of the platform, lights with reflectors behind them, flung their beams upon the im-

provised stage and the American flags draped back of it.

The garage had been turned over to the girls for a dressing room, and there the usual excitement prevailed, even though the costumes, with a few exceptions, were what they wore every day. Mag Whipple with a gray beard and top boots was, indeed, changed beyond recognition, and looked her rôle to the life. Two or three other character parts were quaint and queer, but in general the girls were their everyday selves, except for the extra roses in their cheeks, which the conventions demanded.

"Oh, girls, we're going to have a wonderful crowd," declared Amy, peering from the window of the garage. "The people are coming in flocks, and at a dollar *per,* too. Look, Priscilla."

The leader of the orchestra which consisted of two violins and a piano, did not reply. Priscilla felt the responsibilities of her position keenly. "If anybody else makes a slip," she told Peggy, "it will be easy enough to cover it up, but if the orchestra breaks down, everybody'll know it." Amy, looking over her

shoulder at her unresponsive friend, noted the anxious wrinkle between Priscilla's brows, and forgave her absorption. But her discoveries from the garage window were too exciting to keep to herself. In a moment she had burst out again.

"Peggy, you remember that farm where it began to rain almost as soon as we started work, and we had such a jolly time in the barn? Well, the whole family is here, father, mother, grandmother, little brother, little sister."

No response from Peggy. Amy, turning an inquiring gaze, discovered her arranging the curls of the extremely pretty farmerette to whom had been assigned the rôle of an ex-society butterfly. As Peggy seemed quite unaware that she had been addressed, Amy gave up the attempt to be social, and devoted herself to seeing all there was to be seen.

Once, however, she came very near breaking her unspoken resolution. Young girls from the neighborhood, looking very charming in their white frocks, were acting as ushers, and one of them showed to seats conveniently near the garage, a tall fellow in uniform, accom-

panied by a slender, attractive girl. At the sight of the two, Amy started violently, and turned about, her lips parted as if about to give vent to a vehement ejaculation. But she must have changed her mind, for she said nothing, though her eyes dwelt with seeming amusement on Peggy, hurrying from group to group, giving directions and fairly radiating confidence.

Apart from Amy's prejudice, the audience was an interesting one. A considerable proportion was made up from the wealthy households, occupying summer homes in the vicinity. Mrs. Fitz-Maurice herself had a house party, and her guests were easily distinguished by their costumes, rather over-elaborate for the occasion. The farms in the vicinity were well represented, for there were few where some of the girls had not worked at one time or another, and their employers were interested to see them in the rôle of entertainers. And not a few friends and relatives of the amateur actors had come from the city or some nearby town, to help make the undertaking the success it bade fair to be.

"It's time to begin," Priscilla exclaimed nervously, consulting her wrist watch. "Shall we go out, Marian?"

"Not while the audience is coming in at this rate," Marian Keith said decidedly. "It's queer how people will come so late to a show they've paid money to see, and wouldn't miss for anything. Probably a good many will come after we're started, but we won't start while they're still flocking in."

At the rate the audience were arriving, however, it was clear that the opening would not be long delayed. Priscilla drew her bow across the strings of her violin and tightened them nervously. Peggy, who was to stand back of the drapery of flags and act as prompter, ran over her sheets of paper to be sure that not a page was missing. Amy was the only one of the Friendly Terrace girls who was to appear on the stage, and her part had been added as an afterthought, because, as the girls agreed, she was so "cunning" that it would not be fair to deprive the audience of the pleasure of seeing her. Amy did not know one tune from another, and naturally her few lines were spoken, in-

stead of being sung. As her chief duty consisted in carrying water to the warm and thirsty farmerettes, the responsibility was not enough to make her nervous.

There was a lull in the arrivals. Most of the chairs were filled. The orchestra took its place in front of the stage, and was welcomed with applause. The usual ordeal of tuning the instruments followed, and then the girls struck up the march which was the signal for the opening of the performance, "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

The opening chorus was the song Peggy had written without any dream that the little snowball would presently grow to such impressive proportions.

> "Oh, the days are long and dreary
> And the sun is hot and high."

The girls sang the lines with spirit, and then at the kindly insistence of the audience, sang them over again. Indeed, from the very start it was evident that the audacious undertaking was to be a tremendous success. It hardly need be said that from a professional standpoint the

performance was hopelessly ragged, but contradictory as it may seem, that was in its favor. There was something delightfully spontaneous about it. The girls had not had time to get tired of their parts. They entered into the spirit of the thing with a frank enjoyment that was contagious. And moreover, almost without exception, the audience was in a mood to be generous toward the efforts of the plucky girls, whose peculiar costumes had not been assumed for a frolic, but were typical of a loyal and brave response to the needs of the hour. Every song, whether chorus or solo, was enthusiastically encored, and Peggy, who had sometimes been a little fearful that the program would not be long enough to make the audience feel it had received its dollar's worth, sighed with relief as she realized that they could not possibly finish before half past ten.

As the program moved along without any serious hitches, Peggy realized with astonishment that Mag Whipple was making a hit. Peggy had never been fully persuaded of the wisdom of entrusting Mag with the important rôle of the farmer, and as a concession to her

sense of uneasiness, she had given Mag as much coaching as was possible in the very limited time at her disposal, always insisting on the importance of being perfectly natural. And Mag had surprised her by doing that very thing. Her gruff voice and domineering manner were so typical of the real girl that Peggy found herself laughing every time she spoke a line. The audience laughed too, though for another reason, and Mag's supposedly skilful enactment of a rather difficult rôle called out many an approving burst of applause. Mag, indeed, shared the honors with Minna Eichenberger, whose patriotic outburst when she found her comrades losing heart, was three times encored.

The play had been divided into two acts in order to give the hard-working singers a breathing spell, and Peggy was improving the brief intermission to look the audience over from behind the screening flags, when she uttered a little gasping cry. Amy, who had crept in beside her to offer congratulations, strangled a chuckle as she inquired casually, "What's the matter, Peg?"

"Amy, look quick! There's a girl and a young man sitting—no, not there. Over toward the garage—"

"There's any number of girls and young men," replied Amy teasingly. "Is there anything particular about these two?"

"Why, yes, he's in uniform."

"Oh, I see them now. What about them?"

"It doesn't seem as if I could be mistaken," exclaimed Peggy so dolefully that Amy's conscience gave an uneasy twinge. "Of course they're not very near, but— Don't they look like people you know?"

"Why, yes, they're Graham and Ruth."

"Amy Lassell. You wretch!"

"I saw them come in," explained Amy accepting the tribute calmly. "I started to tell you, but you seemed so taken up with your old show that I thought I wouldn't bother you."

"You're a wretch," repeated Peggy, with even more conviction than before. "Oh, Amy, isn't he big in his uniform."

"Gorgeous," replied Amy. "No wonder Ruth looks eaten up with pride."

"The dear!" said Peggy very tenderly.

"Oh, how glad I shall be when this boring old show is over."

"Boring, indeed! Don't put on airs, Miss Authoress. You know you're tickled to death the way the audience is taking this. And it *is* a good show, though I say it as shouldn't, seeing I'm one of the stars."

A bell tinkled a signal. The orchestra resumed its place, the musicians wearing expansive smiles, since half the program had been finished without a breakdown. The farmerettes marched out from the garage and they, too, showed an appreciable accession of confidence since their earlier appearance. It was well that they had gained in assurance and that slips were less frequent than in the first act, for if the truth be told, the attention of the prompter was continually wandering. She had said that Graham looked big in his uniform, but had failed to add a fact that impressed her with equal force, that he looked extraordinarily handsome.

The second act, which seemed to Peggy to drag intolerably, though no one else, apparently, shared her impression, ended at last in a blaze

of glory. Minna came forward and sang "The Star Spangled Banner," while the audience rose to its feet. It broke into cheers when the song ended, and then there was a forward rush. Proud fathers and mothers seized smiling girls in overalls and hugged them before everybody. The families of the neighboring farmers who felt a sort of proprietary interest in the play and the actors, pressed forward, to offer their congratulations. Mrs. Fitz-Maurice and her friends were much in evidence, uttering the exaggerated compliments people make on such occasions, and finding willing listeners. Marian Keith pounced on Peggy and pulled her up on the stage.

"Peggy Raymond, you stop hiding away and acting as if you didn't have a thing to do with this. They're asking who wrote the thing."

"But I didn't really," Peggy protested. "You know everybody had a hand in the songs." She had an eye on a tall young man in uniform who seemed to be holding back inexplicably. She wished Graham were not so modest.

A youth with a note book claimed her atten-

tion. "I understand you are the author of the libretto, Miss Raymond. I represent the *Clarion.* Will you give me a few interesting facts about yourself?"

"I'm afraid there aren't any that will interest the public," said Peggy. "I'm a college girl the most of the year, and a farmerette the rest of the time."

"How about your *prima donna;* what is her name?"

"You mean—" hesitated Peggy.

"Why the girl who sang the 'Star Spangled Banner.' Is she a college girl, too?"

"I'll call her and she'll tell you what she cares to have printed." Peggy summoned the girl who had made the hit of the evening and the reporter repeated his question. "Edith Brinton," she replied as he asked her name.

"Where's your home, please."

"Winston."

"Is that in this state?"

"Yes, in the western part. It's only a little place."

Peggy heard no more of the conversation and indeed forgot all about the reporter. For Gra-

ham Wylie and Ruth had succeeded in forcing their way through the crowd. The two girls threw their arms about each other, but over Ruth's shoulder, Peggy's glad eyes met Graham's, and before she had addressed a word to him, that observing young man felt very well satisfied with his welcome.

Something new was taking place. A number of Mrs. Fitz-Maurice's friends now appeared in the costumes of Red Cross nurses, selling candy for the benefit of the fund. Tables for serving ice cream were placed here and there. People began to stroll about the brilliantly lighted grounds as if the evening were just beginning. Peggy found herself walking away with Graham, while Amy and Ruth followed close behind.

"Why didn't you write me that you were coming?" She tried to speak reproachfully but it was hard work when she was so happy.

"Ruth thought it would be fun to surprise you. And besides I wasn't sure I could get leave till the last minute."

"Are you going back on the midnight train?"

"Yes, to-morrow night."

"To-morrow!" Peggy's intonation made the exclamation extremely flattering.

"Ruth and I have fixed it up to stay overnight with some people we know in the village. And we'll be out reasonably early if you won't be too tired to see us."

Peggy's smile seemed to imply disbelief in the possibility of feeling tired. "You look so wonderful in your uniform," she exclaimed irrelevantly.

"And you in yours. Peggy, you don't know how proud I am of you."

"Oh, well," murmured Peggy, "if it comes to that—" She did not finish her sentence. "Tell me about your life in camp, Graham, all the little things that you don't have time to write."

She had not noticed particularly the direction in which they were walking. The two had followed the crowd without looking anywhere except at each other. But before Graham had time to comply with her request, a girlish voice attracted the attention of both. "Oh, look!" it said. "Look! Look!" The "looks" came

like a series of explosions, each a little more vehement than its predecessor.

Peggy turned abruptly. A pretty girl in a shimmering evening gown, one of Mrs. Fitz-Maurice's house guests, judging from her appearance, had dropped the arm of her escort, and was pointing dramatically before her. Peggy's head reeled. In glaring letters of feathery green she saw written on the soil, one unexplained but suggestive word:

SLACKER

For the moment Peggy forgot even Graham. She sprang to the side of the girl who had made the discovery. "Let's pull them up," she gasped. "Or trample on them, so no one else can read it. It won't take but a minute."

The other girl wheeled about. "But how did it come there?" she cried. "How did it happen? Why it's the most shivery thing that I ever heard of. It's like—isn't there something in the Bible about handwriting on the wall?"

Peggy made no attempt to enlighten her. "We must be quick," she urged, "before any-

body else notices." She stooped to put her suggestion into effect but as she touched the feathery green, a horror-stricken gasp from the girl beside her, made her straighten quickly. "Bobby" Fitz-Maurice stood just behind her, staring at the voiceless accusation which challenged him from the soil of his own garden. He looked past Peggy and the girl in the evening dress, as if he had never seen either until that moment and his face expressed all the amazement of which the human countenance is capable.

Peggy had no idea how long they stood there, all three incapable of motion or speech. Young Mr. Fitz-Maurice was the first to recover himself. With a galvanic jerk he turned away and went on.

Peggy and the other girl looked at each other. "Oh!" exclaimed the latter, and drew a long breath. "I'd hate to be in his shoes. But who could have done it?"

Peggy guessed the question was merely a rhetorical one and the speaker had no idea she was addressing one of the very few people in the world who could have given her informa-

tion on that point. With a common impulse the two girls turned their attention to the carrots, and their escorts came to their assistance. In less time than it takes to tell it, the crescent shaped flower bed was empty, except for a little pile of wilting plants over in one corner.

CHAPTER X

WINSTON IS HEARD FROM

Blue was not ordinarily Peggy's color, even on a Monday. She was one of the girls who can see work, as well as play, veiled in a rosy mist. But it must be admitted that on the day following Graham's return to camp, she found it a little hard to adjust herself to the extremely work-a-day world which now claimed her attention. The excitement of making ready for the Red Cross entertainment had been a constant if unconscious stimulant for the weeks in which it had been in preparation, and a reaction was inevitable. And the pleasure of the day spent with Graham and Ruth only intensified the pang of separation. Not since her zealous endeavors in "sticking tomatoes" had Peggy gone through her day's work with less heart for it.

Another thing was troubling her and that was the recollection of young Mr. Fitz-Maurice's expression as he stared at the vocal carrot bed, screaming the contemptuous term "Slacker" in

his very face. It might be true that the young man deserved such reproach and worse, but Peggy could not help feeling that the occasion had been extremely inopportune for reminding him of his patriotic deficiencies. They had accepted the hospitality of Mrs. Fitz-Maurice, and without question, much of the success of the entertainment had been due to her lavish assistance. To profit by her aid and then insult her son impressed Peggy as a most undesirable combination.

It was during the noon rest of an extremely hard day that Peggy found the opportunity of telling Alice Cameron the climax to Saturday's excitement. Impressive as she made the story, she could not help realizing that Alice did not share her compunctions.

"I thought the wretched things would have come up long ago," was her only comment. "We must have planted them too deep."

"It's the most extraordinary thing," sighed Peggy, "that no one should have discovered it till late Saturday night. Those carrots weren't just up, Alice. They were quite sizable plants."

"Well, I can't make myself feel very bad about it. Anyway he deserved it richly."

"But it seems awful it should have happened the very day his mother had done so much for us."

"Don't trouble yourself to be too grateful, Peggy. Mrs. Fitz-Maurice is always looking for something new so that she can entertain her crowd. They're a jaded, blasé lot, even the young ones, and they enjoyed seeing us in our overalls, just as she knew they would. Now you mustn't look so disapproving. Of course I believe in giving the devil his due, but—"

"But not Mrs. Fitz-Maurice," smiled Peggy.

Alice laughed. "Don't let it worry you," she insisted. "That *Clarion* reporter was sent out at her suggestion, you may be sure, and he'll give her more credit for the affair than all of us together."

It was not until their return to the Poplars that a chance was given them to prove or disprove the truth of Alice's statement, but promptly on their arrival copies of the morning *Clarion* were flourished in their faces. It was true that the reporter had given Mrs. Fitz-

Maurice full credit for her efforts, but Peggy could see no reason for complaint on that score, since he had slighted no one. Peggy's success in preparing the libretto was given several very flattering lines. The orchestra was complimented, the chorus pronounced unusual. Mag Whipple was mentioned by name as making an excellent impression in an exacting rôle. Peggy read with peculiar interest the closing tribute.

"Special mention should be made of the work of Miss Edith Brinton, a resident of Winston in the western part of the state. This young woman sang like a professional and twice brought the audience up standing, once in the stirring, 'Faint Heart Never Wins,' and again when at the close of the entertainment, she rendered the 'Star Spangled Banner.' Evidently this is not Miss Brinton's first appearance behind the footlights and her talents more than justify her consideration of a professional career."

After dinner Peggy read the account for the second time and in more leisurely fashion, and she looked around for the subject of the closing eulogy with the intention of congratulating her. She was not on the porch, however, and catching sight of Mag Whipple, Peggy said smil-

ingly, "You seem to have covered yourself with glory."

"Yes, I saw it," said Mag briefly. Like the rest of the girls she was knitting and now she gave her entire attention to her sock. Peggy was a little surprised at her lack of responsiveness. Mag was the sort of girl she would have expected to be elated over having her name in the paper.

"We're going to have callers," said a voice behind her, and glancing around, Peggy perceived that a rickety buggy had turned in at the drive and was approaching the house. The girls on the porch were instantly alert, though no one seemed to recognize the occupants of the vehicle. The driver was a boy about fifteen and his passenger a portly woman somewhat past middle age. In front of the house the buggy halted, and the woman alighting came up the steps with an air of being sure of her welcome.

"I s'pose these are the young ladies who gave the grand entertainment Saturday. My! I was disappointed over missing it. Some of our folks went and they said it was the best

thing they ever heard. You ought to repeat it, you really had."

"Won't you sit down," asked Peggy pulling the rocking chair forward. "We're glad if people enjoyed our entertainment, but I think once is enough for us."

The portly woman settled herself in the big chair and at once began rocking. "I felt worse than ever about missing the show," she said, "when I found that one of the very best was a girl from our town. I'm just here on a visit, I live in Winston."

"Then you know Miss Brinton," remarked Marian by way of making conversation.

The portly woman turned a beaming face upon her. "That's the funny part," she chuckled. "I don't, and I would a'sworn there warn't a yellow dog in town that I didn't know, and his ma before him."

The girls joined in her merriment. "When I read that in the paper this morning," she continued, as the laughter died down, "I said to my sister-in-law, the one I'm visiting, that I wanted to see Miss Edith Brinton, and find where on earth she hid herself when she was

home. Seems queer, don't it," she appealed to the circle, "to go off visiting, and then get acquainted with folks from your own home town."

Peggy rose in haste. "I'll find Miss Brinton," she said jerkily, "and tell her you are here." Her smiling manner masked dismay. If this woman lived in the same town as Minna Eichenberger, there was no doubt that she would recognize her as soon as she was confronted with her, and call her by her rightful name. And if Minna were convicted of passing under an *alias,* the sequel was likely to be unpleasant. "Who shall I say is here to see her?" asked Peggy as she crossed the porch.

"Tell her it's Mrs. Carter, please, Mrs. Ulysses J. Carter. I can't remember her to save my life, but if she lives in Winston, I guess there's no danger she won't remember me." And Mrs. Carter smiled with the complacence of a public character, and rocked so vigorously that her chair began zig-zagging across the porch at a very fair rate of progress.

Upstairs Peggy found Minna Eichenberger partially dressed and stretched at her ease on

her cot. She looked up with a smile that changed to blank dismay as Peggy stated her errand.

"Mrs. Carter! From home. Oh, what shall I do?"

"I suppose she knows you."

"Knows me? She knows everybody in Winston. I can't see her."

"No," Peggy agreed gravely. "You mustn't see her."

"It's such a little place," moaned Minna. Just a few hundred people in this great state, and every time I turn around, I meet some one from Winston."

Peggy ignored this outburst. "I'd better say that you're lying down and that you're very tired and ask to be excused."

"Yes, please, tell her that. But, Peggy, I shall have to give up and go away. Oh, why was I such a fool as to try changing my name!"

Minna buried her face in the pillow and cried as if her heart were broken, and if the truth be told, Peggy was glad of the tears. To the other girls the signs of weeping would explain her refusal to see Mrs. Carter. She went down-

stairs thinking very seriously of Minna's problem. Peggy was inclined to believe that she was right in saying that she must go away unless she could resume her proper identity without awakening the suspicion of her associates.

Mrs. Carter heard of the indisposition of her fellow townswoman with unconcealed regret. "Now I wonder if I couldn't slip upstairs and have a little talk with her. Maybe 'twould hearten her up to see somebody from home."

"I—I really think it wouldn't be best," said Peggy hastily. "She's very much upset. She's been crying and she feels dreadfully nervous."

"She didn't happen to say, did she, in what part of Winston her home is, and whether she lives with an aunt or somebody of a different name. For I never heard of any family named Brinton."

"I didn't ask her anything about it," replied Peggy with what she hoped was an air of finality. "She isn't in any condition to be questioned."

"Well, well, it certainly is disappointing," sighed Mrs. Carter. "I wouldn't mind so much

if I wasn't going home to-morrow. But I've been away three weeks now, and my husband says he's used every dish in the house, and now he's starting the second time around on the dirty ones. Looks like it was time for me to be getting back."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Peggy, thankful for Mrs. Carter's sense of responsibility. "And I can tell her to be sure to see you when she goes home."

Mrs. Carter seized upon the suggestion. "Yes, that's right. Tell her to come and see me. She's pretty sure to know where I live but in case she shouldn't, just tell her it's two doors from the Baptist church. Mrs. Ulysses J. Seems as if she must have been hiding her light under a bushel in Winston, if she can sing so well, and I never heard of her. There's not more than two girls in the whole town who've got what you'd call good voices."

Fearful that the visitor was about to mention Minna's name and with unreasonable certainty that this would precipitate disaster, Peggy flung herself into the breach. She introduced a topic almost violently irrelevant and contin-

ued to chatter of everything she could think of that had no relation to the object of Mrs. Carter's visit. She had an uneasy certainty that she was talking a great deal of nonsense, and that Priscilla was looking at her in surprise, puzzled by her unwonted volubility. But if Priscilla's mood was critical, that was not the case with Mrs. Carter. She responded in whole-souled fashion to Peggy's efforts to be entertaining. The dejected old horse attached to the buggy, turned his head occasionally, and gave Mrs. Carter a glance of heartfelt reproach, and the small boy who acted as Mrs. Carter's driver, wriggled as though the seat of the buggy had become as uncomfortable as St. Laurence's gridiron, and still the good woman sat rocking and talking and smiling expansively at Peggy.

It was almost bed time when she recollected herself, "Well, well," she exclaimed, "if it isn't nearly dark." To Peggy's immense relief she rose and began pulling on a pair of cotton gloves which she had removed, the better to enjoy the conversation. "I'm real sorry not to have seen Edith, but you can tell her for me that I've had an awful pleasant evening, with-

out any help from her. And say she must be sure to look me up as soon as she gets back home. And as for you," concluded Mrs. Carter, turning on Peggy and seizing her by both hands, "if ever you are out Winston way, I want you to come and make me a visit. The longer you stay, the better I'll like it." And she emphasized her invitation by implanting a kiss on Peggy's blushing cheek.

With a sensation of unutterable relief, Peggy watched the buggy creep dejectedly down the drive.

"I think I'll go up and see how—Edith is now," she said, rising to her feet and addressing the group in general.

"Is she really sick?" asked one of the girls. "I didn't notice anything wrong at dinner."

"Oh, I don't think she's really sick," replied Peggy veraciously, "but she's unstrung and nervous."

"Temperamental, I suppose; most singers are," said Alice Cameron.

"She never seemed a bit like that to me," exclaimed Marian. "I always thought she was just a little stolid."

Peggy left them arguing the question. She hurried upstairs, lighted the lamp nearest Minna's bed and viewed approvingly the swollen, inflamed features which bore out all she had said downstairs. "Has she gone?" came in a husky whisper.

"Yes, at last. And she's going back to Winston to-morrow, I'm glad to say."

The other girl echoed her sigh of relief. "But after all," she exclaimed, as if arguing with herself quite as much as with Peggy, "what of it? If she goes, there'll be somebody else. I might as well give up and go away, before I'm exposed as a fraud."

Peggy sat down on the edge of the cot. It really was no wonder if in her conversation with Mrs. Carter she had often seemed to herself to be talking nonsense, as all the time she had been thinking of something else.

"Listen," she said in a low voice. "I've got an idea. That reporter on the *Clarion* said you sang like a professional. Now tell me, have you ever sung in public?"

"Why, yes, a little," replied Minna in a stifled voice so thoroughly drained of music by

her long fit of weeping that it was hard to believe she was the girl whose songs had thrilled her audience two days earlier.

"Tell me about it."

"Why, after I left the conservatory I sang in a church choir for a while, and then I had an offer to do concert work with a young violinist, Mariani his name was. He really was wonderfully talented, but he hadn't an atom of responsibility. He'd come when he got ready, or not at all, and our tour was a perfect fizzle. It only lasted three weeks."

Peggy's manner showed great satisfaction. "But you really did sing in different cities?"

"Oh, yes, quite a number, fifteen or eighteen, I suppose."

"And had your name in the papers?"

"Why, yes, though of course I wasn't much, just a sort of filler-in."

"That doesn't matter. Now listen." Her enthusiasm manifesting itself, in spite of the necessity of whispering, Peggy unfolded her plan.

But it is hard to kindle damp firewood and Minna's tears had apparently left her in a

drenched condition, proof against sparks. The most Peggy could wring from her was the admission that she supposed it would not do any harm to try.

CHAPTER XI

LENDING A HAND

It was Peggy's first experience in haying and for all it was hard work, she found it enjoyable, too. She had discovered that there was a knack in pitching a big forkful of the fragrant, rustling stuff upon the load, and necessary as strength was, skill counted as much. The sweetness of the perfumed air, the swarms of yellow butterflies in attendance, the soft, incessant hum of myriad insects, all lent a certain poetic charm to a task prosaic enough in itself.

It must be admitted that the afore-mentioned poetry was much more marked in the dewy freshness of eight o'clock, than when the sun had risen higher in the heavens. As noon drew near, Peggy found herself looking forward to the rest hours with an expectancy she did not often feel. Her back was aching and her arms felt as if metal bands were clamped about them,

while the perspiration trickled over her hot cheeks, without cooling them perceptibly.

At last came the welcome signal. The horses were unhitched from the hay wagon and taken into the barn for their midday meal while the girls mopped their damp faces, stretched themselves luxuriously, and looked about to choose an attractive spot for eating their luncheon. Peggy had fixed her eyes on a spreading elm tree, casting a circle of shade that looked fairly purple against the vivid green of the sun-lighted grass beyond, and in company with Marian Keith was walking toward the appealing spot, when a passing automobile halted unexpectedly, and a girl, alighting, approached the barbed wire fence.

Naturally enough all eyes turned in her direction. Peggy, looking with the others, came to a sudden stop. The sport suit and the jaunty little hat pulled down over her eyes failed to prove a disguise, for at once Peggy recognized the girl who had discovered the word "Slacker" growing up greenly in the Beechwood gardens. Her recognition of Peggy was almost a matter of course, since Peggy was wearing practically

the same costume as on the night of the entertainment. Across the stubble of the hay field, the eyes of the two met, and the stranger smiled and beckoned.

Peggy obeyed the summons with a rather obvious unwillingness. Ever since Saturday she had been doing her best to forget the disagreeable occurrence which had almost spoiled her satisfaction in the success of the enterprise she had had so much at heart. The sight of the pretty girl in the sport suit brought it all back, and she felt herself blushing under her sunburn and tan, as she went forward to meet her.

Fortunately, however, the other girl did not seem to notice the reluctance of her approach. "Isn't this luck!" she exclaimed joyously. "I was just hoping one of them would turn out to be you."

The cordiality of this greeting took Peggy aback. She tried to atone for her previous hesitation by a very friendly smile.

"I'd like to have a talk with you," the other girl went on. "I don't want any of the others around. When can I see you?"

"I'm not exactly sure," replied Peggy, with a return of her previous misgivings. "You see I'm working till five o'clock."

"Oh, yes. How would it do for me to come for you and drive you home? We can talk on the way."

Peggy said it would do very well. Her instinctive wish to be agreeable enabled her to speak with a conviction she was far from feeling.

"Five o'clock," the girl repeated. "Well, I'll be here promptly."

"Please," said Peggy, "for if you're not, I shall have to go in the bus, for fear something has happened to keep you from coming, you know. After pitching hay all day, I'd hate to walk home."

"Sure thing," Peggy's new friend agreed. "Do you know you look perfectly darling today. Your face is as red as an apple and under that big hat, quite too cunning for anything. By the way, what's your name?"

Peggy gave the desired information. "Mine's Isabel Ewing," said the other. "So that we can start fair this afternoon, let's agree

right now to cut out all formality and call each other by our first names."

"Then you'll have to call me Peggy. All my friends do."

"I'd adore that," said Miss Isabel Ewing. "And Peggy's exactly the name for you, a sort of hugable name, don't you know. Well, see you later, Peggy."

"At five o'clock," said Peggy and went off to the shade of the elm tree and luncheon, with a feeling that the forthcoming interview was not to be so formidable, after all.

Some minutes before five a little roadster came in sight and halted at the entrance to the drive. Peggy looked in its direction, and a flutter of a hand assured her of the arrival of her charioteer. At five o'clock when the other girls hurried to the bus, Peggy made her way down to the road where Isabel awaited her. She wore still another frock, and her bare hands flashed with rings.

"So you can drive a car yourself," exclaimed Peggy, climbing in rather stiffly, for the new work had left her lame and tired. "How clever of you! I've been trying to learn to

drive the bus this summer, but I'm afraid I haven't made much progress."

"Oh, yes, I'm a fairly good driver," Isabel returned. "They say reckless, but don't worry, I'm not going to spill you." She shifted her gears and then added, "I'm going to drive rather slowly, for I want to talk about the other night."

"Yes," said Peggy, her heart sinking.

"Well, we had quite an exciting time after you folks had gone. Bobby was furious. His mother couldn't make out from his talk what had happened. But he let something drop so she knew I was mixed up in it, and she came to me to find out. I had great fun explaining."

"Oh, dear," Peggy sighed with ready sympathy. "I can imagine how you must have felt."

Isabel shot an amused glance in her direction. "No, I mean it," she said. "It *was* fun. Mrs. Fitz-Maurice thinks it's a perfectly awful thing for her to be inconvenienced the least little bit by anything like a war. She's always saying that she can't see what the government's about,

if anything interferes with her doing exactly as usual."

"But I'm sure," insisted Peggy, "she was very kind to go to such trouble—"

"Oh, she's ready for anything that gives her a chance for a splurge. She had a house party and she had to provide entertainment for us. And that was something new, and she didn't care whether it was for the Red Cross or to equip an expedition to the North Pole."

Peggy was silent, finding it hard to appear responsive while listening to Isabel's frank criticism of her hostess. And apparently without realizing the other girl's silent disapproval, Isabel rattled blithely on.

"It really was funny to see her when I told her about that word "Slacker" in the flower bed. At first she said I must be mistaken, and when I had explained to her that we'd all seen it, Bobby and all, she couldn't imagine how it came there. But at last the explanation occurred to her."

"Oh, did it?" said Peggy faintly.

"Yes, it seems that they used to have a maid that was a rather impertinent piece. She had

a brother with the Canadian forces, Mrs. Fitz-Maurice said, and she left to go into a munition factory or something. Mrs. Fitz-Maurice is sure she must have done it."

Peggy remembered the girl who had talked with Alice and herself that day at Beechwood. "No," she said with quiet positiveness, "she had nothing to do with it."

The car lurched as Isabel wheeled around to look at her. "Nothing to do with it? Then you know?"

"Yes, I know."

"It couldn't have been you," Isabel declared, eyeing her with interest. "It's not a bit your style."

"I'm not going to say who it was, but I can tell you who it wasn't. And that girl—Ellen Goss, her name was—didn't know a thing about it."

"Well, she might as well take the blame, for they had a falling out before she left and there's no chance that she'll ever come back. And I'm sure I shouldn't like her any the less for having enough pep to tell us the truth. It isn't only Bobby, you know. It's all of us."

"You mean—"

"Slackers," said Isabel promptly. "Every last one of us. I don't mean all the people with money, you understand. Why, I know girls whose fathers are worth millions who have just given up everything for war work. But this particular crowd I belong to, only cares for a gay time. The war makes things a little more exciting, don't you know, but we don't take it seriously."

"I'm sure you're not fair to yourself," Peggy exclaimed. She could not imagine a girl's realizing such defects and making no effort to change.

"Oh, I'm fair enough," said Isabel. "Slackers! That's what we are. I suppose if our brothers and cousins go across and are killed, we'll change more or less, but I'm not sure. Don't you know when people have lived for themselves ever since they can remember, it's hard to start in all at once and think about your country and humanity and all that sort of thing. Sometimes we play we do for a little, but we get tired of it after a bit, and want a new game."

The girlish voice had grown bitter. The smile that flashed at Peggy was cynical and disillusioned.

"Why don't you join the Land Army?" asked the downright Peggy.

"I considered that very thing the other night. But think, my dear, how bad it must be for the complexion."

"The Red Cross can keep you busy."

"That would be fun for a few days. Then some morning I wouldn't feel like getting up, and I'd sleep till noon and in the afternoon go to the matinee. I couldn't trust myself to stick."

"Make up your mind that you will."

Isabel laughed. Peggy wondered whether in this mood she looked older than she really was, or whether it was her girlish look that was misleading.

"You've been doing that all your life," she said. "Making up your mind to do a thing and doing it. One can see that by looking at you. And all my life I've been making up my mind to do things, and then not doing them and now I can't be different."

"You can," Peggy exclaimed indignantly. "Of course you can."

They were in sight of the Poplars now. The roadster had left the bus far behind. Isabel looked at Peggy with a rather wistful smile.

"How much you believe in," she said. "And that's what makes you so dear. When I saw you on Saturday night, I wished I could have a friend like you, I did, really."

"Well," cried Peggy, "you've got your wish, you've got me."

"No, I haven't," Isabel turned into the drive with reckless speed. "You think you like me because I've been putting on a lot I don't really mean. If you knew how frivolous and vain and selfish and superficial I really am—"

"That's only one you," interrupted Peggy. "And the one I like is the girl who has been talking to me all the way home."

Isabel smiled faintly. "Oh, I see, a case of dual identity."

"There are always at least two of us, aren't there?" said Peggy. "And all we need is to give a boost to the right one." The car was stopping at the door and she turned and put

out her hand. There was a yearning pity in her heart, for the girl who could dissect her own weaknesses so mercilessly, and yet seemed to lack the determination to correct them. Something of her feeling must have been visible in her eyes, for Isabel ignored the extended hand, and leaning forward kissed her impulsively. Peggy, alighting, turned with an uneasy sense that here was still something for her to do, but the roadster described a dizzy circle and sped down the drive to the road. Though Peggy stood gazing till it was out of sight, she could not see that the driver once turned to look back.

Minna had done K. P. duty that day, and Peggy's early return gave the two a chance for a few words before the arrival of the others. "Do you think you'd better try it to-night?" asked Minna, who was very pale.

"I don't see why to-night isn't the best time there ever will be."

"Well, just as you say. But if it doesn't work—"

"But it is going to work," insisted Peggy. "You mustn't let yourself think of anything

else." And then at the sound of voices, she smiled encouragingly at the troubled girl, and went to make her toilet for dinner.

As the night was warm, the after-dinner gathering was on the porch. Peggy waited to be sure that every girl was present. Some one asked Priscilla to play and when she had complied, Marian suggested another favorite. But before she could accede to the request, Peggy rose briskly to her feet.

"Just a minute," she said informally. "Before Priscilla plays again, I have a very important announcement to make. I've just been bursting to tell you for days and days, but it seemed best to wait till the entertainment was over."

This opening was of a sort to insure the close attention of every one present. Peggy made a tantalizing pause, smiled across the circle of interested faces, and continued. She had every appearance of making an off-hand speech, but in reality every word had been carefully chosen.

"I suppose you have all heard," continued Peggy impressively, "of the noted concert

singer, Minna Eichenberger. She was the one who toured with the violinist, Mariani, you remember?" There was a little upward tilt to her voice as she finished, and she looked around interrogatively. There is a weakness in human nature which makes most people reluctant to acknowledge ignorance, when their information on any subject has been assumed, and Peggy was counting on this characteristic. A number of the girls tried to look as if they distinctly remembered Minna Eichenberger.

"We've been honored without knowing it," continued Peggy, fairly beaming on her absorbed listeners, "in having Minna Eichenberger one of our number. When America went into the war she felt that she just had to do something for her country or—or bust. I don't suppose any of the rest of us have ever been famous enough, so that we were inconvenienced by having people recognize us, but she was afraid it might interfere with her serving her country if she enlisted in the army under her own name. And so she took another that nobody had ever heard of."

A little buzz of whispering began to be heard.

Eyes were turning to the corner where Minna sat, her face extremely flushed for a public character, accustomed to being the center of attention.

"Of course you understand now," exclaimed Peggy, "why she didn't want to take the leading part in our entertainment, and why that smart *Clarion* reporter said she sang like a professional. She wants all of us to know who she is and yet keep her secret, so her work won't be interfered with. With us she'll be Minna, and to every one else Edith Brinton."

Peggy sat down, as well satisfied with herself as she had ever been in all her life. For her audacious scheme had been entirely successful. The girls were crowding around the flushing Minna, exclaiming and asking questions. And Minna, discovering that the revelation of her German name had not awakened a ripple of suspicion as far as she could see, pulled herself together, and attempted to live up to the rôle Peggy had assigned her. Peggy's conscience did not trouble her because of her undeniable exaggeration of Minna's claims to distinction, as this seemed to her a necessary precaution

against exaggeration in the other direction. There was a spark of mischief in her eyes as she watched the congratulatory group around Minna, each one carefully concealing the fact that she had never heard of this distinguished singer till that evening.

"Seems to me," suggested Priscilla, when the excitement had partially subsided, "that as long as we've discovered a *prima donna* right in our midst, we ought to have some singing."

Minna was rather touchingly eager to comply. She sang for the rest of the evening, sometimes alone, sometimes with Priscilla accompanying her on the violin. Once she borrowed a guitar from a girl who owned one of these romantic instruments, and played her own accompaniment to some crooning lullabies. And when at the close of the impromptu concert she sang a tender little love song, her eyes met Peggy's, and a light in their depths revealed the gratitude filling her heart.

"I suppose we'll be telling our grandchildren about this some day," laughed one girl, as they went upstairs to bed. "How the famous Minna Eichenberger did farm work with us one sum-

mer, and entertained us by singing to us in the evenings." She whirled about suddenly, "Peggy Raymond, how long have you known?"

"I've known for some time," replied Peggy demurely, "and I suspected quite a while before I knew."

She was just ready for bed when Amy joined her. "I always knew you were smart, Peggy," she whispered in one ear, "but I never knew *how* smart till this evening." And when the lights were out, they were still sitting on the edge of Peggy's cot, helpless with laughter.

CHAPTER XII

SAVING THE PEACH CROP

"I AM really very sorry," said Mrs. Lockwood, her tone indicating that the expression of regret was not a mere matter of form, "but I don't see that I can do anything for you."

The man she was addressing ran his fingers through his iron-gray hair. He was middle-aged and his thin, intellectual face seemed to contradict the testimony of his work-hardened hands. His voice, as he answered her, revealed the man of culture.

"It's a rather serious situation," he said. "I depend for my income very largely on my peach crop, and now they are ready for the market and there is no one to pick them."

"If you had come a week ago," said Mrs. Lockwood, "I could have arranged to give you help for a few days. But now every girl is promised at least a week ahead."

"I understand. But for years I have de-

pended on practically the same workers to pick my peaches, and two weeks ago the full force promised to be on hand. In these two weeks they have evaporated. There's not more than one or two I can count on, and by to-morrow they may have disappeared."

"We might possibly spare you one of the girls who is assigned to kitchen duty," mused Mrs. Lockwood aloud. "In such an emergency I'm sure the others would be willing to do a little extra work. Miss Raymond."

"Yes, Mrs. Lockwood," said Peggy eagerly. For this interview between the matron at the Poplars and Mr. Nichols, the proprietor of a large peach orchard in the neighborhood, had taken place on the broad porch, with forty girls as attentive listeners. And the animation in Peggy's voice was accounted for by the fact that she had been assigned to K. P. duty for the morrow. Capable as Peggy was in household matters, it must be admitted that at this juncture, the hardest kind of outdoor work appealed to her more than peeling vegetables or washing dishes.

Mrs. Lockwood smiled at her eager look, per-

fectly understanding the reason. "You are assigned to kitchen duty to-morrow, I believe."

"Yes, Mrs. Lockwood."

"I think we shall have to ask your associates to excuse you out of consideration for Mr. Nichols' peach crop."

"I'm very much obliged," said the proprietor of the peach orchard in a tone of blank dejection, and Mrs. Lockwood regarded him sympathetically.

"I suppose so few cannot do much," she said.

"Very little. Of course my family will work early and late, and as I say, there may be one or two of my regular pickers on hand to-morrow. And this young lady." His eyes rested on Peggy with no appreciable decrease of his melancholy. "But such a force is entirely inadequate."

"Oh!" exclaimed Peggy, with such an effect of having come into possession of a bright idea that they all looked at her with interest. "Well, Miss Raymond?" prompted Mrs. Lockwood, after waiting a moment for her to speak.

Peggy lifted shining eyes. "I just happened to think of something. I don't know whether

it would work or not, or what Mr. Nichols would think of that sort of help." She turned toward the dejected fruit-grower. "There's a house party at a place called Beechwood. Nearly all of them are young people."

"Yes," said Mr. Nichols, looking very blank. It was clear he was unable to see any connection between Mrs. Fitz-Maurice's house party and his peculiar troubles.

"I had a little talk with one of the girls the other day," Peggy continued, "and I think she feels rather bad because she herself and her particular crowd are not doing more. And I thought we might persuade them to help us out."

Mr. Nichols smiled faintly. "I'm afraid," he said, "you are somewhat over-sanguine, Miss—er—Raymond. I have lived in this neighborhood twenty years, and am tolerably familiar with the elements that constitute a house party."

Peggy hesitated, a trifle daunted by his evident scepticism. "I don't see that it would do any harm to try."

"Oh, no harm in the world," said Mr. Nichols,

his manner indicating that it would be as little harm as good.

"May I use the telephone, Mrs. Lockwood?" Peggy asked, glancing at the matron, who answered with an emphatic, "Certainly." She was less pessimistic than Mr. Nichols, having discovered that Peggy belonged to that small but influential class of people who are likely to get what they go after. Her eyes, as they followed the girl, showed both amusement and expectancy.

Not until Peggy had given the Fitz-Maurice number, did it occur to her that she was doing an audacious thing. She realized suddenly that she was glad to be talking at one end of a telephone wire, instead of face to face. With an impatient twitch of her shoulders, she shrugged that thought aside. Isabel had said she wanted to help. Now she was giving her the chance she desired.

A feminine voice, that of a maid presumably, answered her call. "May I speak to Miss Isabel Ewing?" asked Peggy, her heart quickening its beat.

"I'll see if Miss Ewing is disengaged.

Please hold the line." There was a sound of retreating footsteps. Peggy waited so long that even her optimism was in danger of heart failure when a languid voice said, "Hello!"

"Is this you, Isabel?"

"Yes, but who is this?"

"Peggy Raymond."

There was a pause as if of astonishment, then a little laugh. "How nice!" said a voice, distinctly friendly.

"Perhaps you won't think so, when I tell you what I called you up for. How many of your house party would like to pick peaches tomorrow and the day after, and the day after that?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

Peggy explained the predicament of Mr. Nichols. "And it isn't his loss alone. It's a loss to the country, bushels and barrels of splendid peaches going to waste when we oughtn't to throw away so much as a crumb. I never have picked peaches but it can't be very hard work, and it seemed to me this was just the chance you were looking for."

Isabel's voice came back with no hint of its

former languor. "You can count on me for one."

"Good girl! I knew it."

"But I'm not sure how many of the others will come."

"Bring them all if you can, the more the merrier."

"I know I can bring a few," exclaimed Isabel in a more confident tone. "I'll do my best. Do you start work at eight o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Burrrr!" Isabel's tone suggested that she was contemplating something in the nature of a plunge into ice water. "Well, I'll see what I can do. To-morrow morning you can count on a representation from Beechwood. Tell me exactly where the place is."

Peggy gave the information. "Shall we send the bus for you?" she asked.

"No need in the world. The place is alive with machines. *Au revoir,* then, Peggy. See you at eight o'clock."

The news Peggy brought back to the group on the porch failed to put heart into the dejected Mr. Nichols. "Very fine," he said, "if the

young lady doesn't change her mind over night. I am rather familiar with the type that make up the house parties in this valley." He added as he rose to go, that he was greatly obliged for their sympathy.

Peggy reached the fruit farm early the following morning. She was taken to her destination first, as most of the girls were to work some miles from the Poplars in the other direction. Of all the places she had seen, this pleased her most.

The peach orchard sloped away to the hills, the long lines of trees looking to her fancy like columns of soldiers, advancing in unbroken formation up a steep incline, and the beautiful fruit, only partly hidden by the green leaves, lent a poetic charm to the day's occupation. The melancholy Mr. Nichols greeted her without enthusiasm, and set her to work. The two of them were joined in a few minutes by Mrs. Nichols, a daughter not far from Peggy's age, and two boys, of twelve and fourteen respectively.

"Quite a family party," remarked Peggy cheerily, after she had learned just what it was

they wanted of her, and had set about doing it.

"And it's about all we can look for to-day," replied Mr. Nichols mournfully. "One of the workers on whom I still depend telephoned me last evening that he had taken a position in town. The other hasn't had the decency to let me know, but I don't doubt he has done the same."

"But there are the people from Beechwood," Peggy reminded him.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Nichols, "the people from Beechwood," and his voice became, if possible, a shade more melancholy than before.

It really was two minutes past eight, Peggy saw, by referring to her wrist watch. She began to feel a little anxious. Isabel acknowledged that all her life she had been resolving to do things and then not doing them. Could it be that she would fail after her ardent promise of the night before? Peggy waved the thought away. "I won't believe it," she told herself, "I won't! I won't!"

Five minutes passed. Peggy and Mr.

Nichols were working on opposite sides of the same tree. "There's an automobile," she told him eagerly.

"Someone trying to catch a train," observed Mr. Nichols, "judging from the way he's speeding."

Peggy did not reply. The car sweeping down the road was full of people, she perceived. Then she saw a roadster racing along behind the big car at a tremendous rate. Fearing that Mr. Nichols would think her more interested in the passers-by than in her work, she glued her eyes upon the peaches. When she dared take another peep, the car in the lead was turning up the drive. "There!" Peggy fairly shouted.

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Nichols and went forward to receive the new arrivals.

There were eight people in the touring car and three in the roadster. It appeared that, not content with inspiring her fellow-guests, Isabel had telephoned to a neighboring country house and had pressed five of that group into service. Most of them were girls, but there were a few young men, and, recognizing Bobby Fitz-Maurice

among the number, Peggy blushed till she rivaled the peaches.

Isabel explained casually that they were late because one of the girls who had promised to help had overslept and they had waited while she dressed, stimulating her to haste by catcalls under her window. But once on hand they settled down to work in a fashion that relieved Peggy's lingering apprehension. Enthusiasm frequently proves a fair substitute for experience. If the young people who had come to Mr. Nichols' aid knew nothing about picking peaches, they were interested in the work and eager to show themselves competent. As Mr. Nichols went from tree to tree explaining and suggesting, he seemed to Peggy less like a melancholy Jaques than at any time since she had made his acquaintance.

Ordinarily, Peggy's luncheon was of interest chiefly because it meant stopping work and resting. She had brought a little package of sandwiches from the Poplars. They were always made the previous evening and, though wrapped in oiled paper, were frequently rather dry by noon. Generally the farmer's wife provided

them with something to drink, milk, buttermilk or coffee, but the menu was always thoroughly consistent with the simple life. But to-day was to prove an exception. At half past eleven one of the Beechwood automobiles appeared, containing two large hampers and two servants in addition to the chauffeur. One of the servants, after a respectful consultation with young Mr. Fitz-Maurice, proceeded to unpack the hampers and prepare a feast. Peggy's eyes widened as she saw a white table cloth spread upon the grass. And then all sorts of delicacies began to come out of the hamper, fried chicken, marvelous salads, sandwiches resembling those in her package only in name, cakes at which one could not look without having one's mouth water. A coffee urn was set up under the tree, and a spirit lamp lighted beneath it. There were dishes enough, it seemed to Peggy, for a formal dinner.

Work stopped promptly at twelve. Peggy was slipping away to eat her solitary sandwiches when Isabel came hurrying after her.

"Peggy, you'll lunch with us to-day."

Peggy had a spasm of unwonted shyness.

"I'm afraid I don't look fit." And indeed her costume was in striking contrast to that of the other girls, who were dressed as they might have been for any picnic affair.

"Nonsense! We're the ones who don't look fit. You're dressed for the part, and we're not, that's all. Come along."

Isabel's persuasion might have failed to move Peggy had she not glanced in the direction of the snowy table cloth and its inviting load. The sight was too much for her resolution. Peggy loved good things to eat as much as any other normal girl, and the food at the Poplars, though nutritious and abundant, was not like home fare. With a sigh she capitulated.

Everything was quite as good as it looked, but in spite of that fact and in spite of Isabel Ewing's friendliness, Peggy was not altogether at ease. She could not help feeling that these ultra modern young people looked on her as something of a curiosity, and were hopeful that Isabel would lead her on to talk. She was grateful to Isabel for failing to do this, and as she ate, Peggy used her ears much more than her tongue. Young Mr. Fitz-Maurice sat not

far from her, and though he spoke to her once or twice, nothing in his manner indicated that he recalled having seen her before.

It took three days to gather Mr. Nichols' peaches. To her own surprise Peggy was sent to the fruit farm each of the three days, and though she did not know it, it was all due to the representation Mr. Nichols made over the telephone. "She's in with that set somehow or other," he told Mrs. Lockwood, "and it's on her account they're here. If you take her away, the chances are the other eleven will go back on me." Mrs. Lockwood saw the point and agreed that it would be a pity to remove Peggy when she could keep a dozen at work.

On the second day the party from Beechwood was out in force. On the third the number was sadly diminished. But thanks to an accident to a piece of farm machinery, a number of Peggy's comrades were unable to do the work they had planned for that day, and they came to the fruit farm instead, and did not leave till all the ripe peaches had been picked and packed for shipment.

"Lucky there wasn't another day of it,"

Isabel told Peggy. "It was all I could do to get them out to-day. I told you we were like that. Probably to-morrow I wouldn't have come myself."

"You know better," Peggy exclaimed indignantly. "You know you would have stuck till the job was finished."

Isabel did not deny her statement. But she smiled in that inscrutable fashion which always made Peggy feel extremely young, and went on with her work. As they were not to return to the Nichols farm the following day, and Peggy knew that Isabel was going home at the end of the week, she anticipated a more formal leave-taking than on the previous days. But when the Beechwood automobile carried the peach pickers back to the luxury of the Fitz-Maurice home, Isabel merely nodded to Peggy in passing, and gave her attention to young Mr. Fitz-Maurice who sat next her. And Peggy climbing into the bus beside Marian, had a sensation of relief at being again in the society of her own kind.

CHAPTER XIII

A SUNDAY AFTERNOON

Even Priscilla had commented on the fact that Mag Whipple was a different girl. In what the change consisted, it was not easy to say, for its manifestations were largely negative. Mag did not talk so much as usual. She did not brag. She did not watch her associates with her customary superior smile, tinged with contempt. She was silent and subdued, listless and with something in her manner suggesting dejection. Peggy wondered if she were sick or homesick.

"Probably she's pining for her associates in the dairy lunch room," said Priscilla, who saw no reason to waste good sympathy on a girl of Mag's sort.

"Don't, Priscilla! You're not fair. Lately there's something almost pathetic about her."

"Pathetic! That six footer." Priscilla

burst into a ringing laugh, undeterred by Peggy's evident annoyance.

"People have been known to be sick and even to suffer, though they were six feet tall, which Mag isn't, of course. And I'm going to find out what ails her."

"Do! I'd devote myself to her. She'll be so appreciative."

Peggy made no reply, but Priscilla read an added determination in her compressed lips, and they parted a little coolly. It was a Sunday afternoon, and for all its forty odd occupants, the big house was very quiet. Peggy going downstairs, found Mag sitting on the front porch, at this hour of the day sunny and uncomfortable. Something in her attitude was expressive of the curious despondency Peggy had noticed so often of late.

She went up to her briskly. "Is it too hot for a little walk, do you think?"

Mag stared at her. "Do you mean you want me to go to walk—with you?"

"I thought it would be nice if you felt equal to it."

"Equal to it!" exclaimed Mag almost

angrily. "I don't look as if a little walk would lay me out, do I? If I felt like it, I could walk twenty miles."

"Then, if you feel like it, it's walk one or two," laughed Peggy. "I'd rather be excused from the twenty, if you don't mind."

Mag rose without a word and the two girls went down the steps and across the warm grass toward the nearest patch of woodland. Peggy suggested taking a path so well worn as to suggest that it must lead to some place worth going to, and Mag agreed with a grunt. Peggy commented on the sunshine, on the butterflies, on a woodpecker whose red head caught her attention in the distance, and Mag either repeated her grunt, or gave no sign of having heard. Peggy was beginning to feel rather at a loss, when Mag suddenly took the initiative.

"What did you ask me to go to walk with you for?"

Though Peggy knew the worthiness of her motive, she blushed rosily. "I thought you looked as if a little exercise would do you good," she explained.

"You mean you were sorry for me."

Mag's statement had the effect of an accusation, and for all the gentleness of Peggy's voice, there was more than a trace of dignity in her manner as she answered, "I'm sorry for anyone who is sick or out of sorts."

Mag did not answer for a moment. She walked at Peggy's side, breathing hard. Gradually certainty overcame Peggy's amazed incredulity. There could be no doubt of it. This big, broad-shouldered young woman was on the point of tears.

"See here," cried Mag at last. "What's the matter with me, anyway?"

"I—I—do you mean—"

"What's the matter with me that makes you sorry, and makes the rest of 'em look at me as if I was something wild, that had got away from a show?"

"I—you—why—Mag—" Peggy began to wish she had been guided by Priscilla's prejudices.

"You might as well tell me," Mag exclaimed, "I've known it was something ever since the night of that show. Don't you remember what that newspaper fellow said about me? He said

that I took the part of the Rube in a 'manner that left nothing to be desired.' "

"But he was praising you, Mag," Peggy's relief in finding herself able to finish a sentence was indicated by her extreme animation. "He meant you acted the part perfectly."

"Only you see," said Mag Whipple drily, "I wasn't acting."

The penetration of the remark struck Peggy dumb. They walked on in silence.

"You told me to be natural," Mag continued, "and I *was* natural. I just talked it off same as I would anywhere, and every time I opened my mouth, they'd laugh."

"But—but—" stammered Peggy, "we were trying to make them laugh."

"I s'pose we were," Mag admitted grudgingly, "but I don't know why they did. I couldn't see anything funny about it. I guess I looked kind of queer, with a false beard on, and a wig, but it wasn't my looks. They just gave a little laugh when I came on, but when I said anything, they'd roar. It's me. There's something funny about me."

"You helped to make our entertainment a

success, Mag," Peggy said encouragingly. "Every one was pleased, and praised you. And it seems a pity to make yourself unhappy about it."

"I've worked in the city," Mag continued angrily. "I'm not half so much of a Rube as lots of folks round here. Those Dell girls on the farm where we worked yesterday are a different kind. You can just see the hayseed in their hair. But nobody laughs at them."

"Why should they?" asked Peggy, losing her temper a little. "They're as sweet and jolly as any girls I've met in a long time. Why should anyone laugh at them?"

"They're hayseeds, ain't they? They were born and reared on a farm."

"That isn't what I call a hayseed. And if it is, being a hayseed isn't anything to mind."

Mag dropped the subject of the Dell girls. "Well," she repeated insistently, "what's funny about me?"

Peggy grew a little pale. Like most people who like to make themselves agreeable, she had a weakness for smoothing things over. She might have tried it in this instance, if she had

not realized that Mag Whipple, roused at last to a sense of her own shortcomings, deserved the truth she asked for.

"I'll answer that question as well as I can, Mag, though I don't know as you'll like my answer. But as long as you've asked me, you ought not to be angry."

"Go ahead."

"In the first place," hesitated Peggy, trying not to make the hard truth any harder than was absolutely necessary. "You haven't had the same advantages as the rest of us."

"I never did care for highbrow stuff."

"I don't mean that altogether," Mag's gruffness was helping to stiffen Peggy's resolution. "I was thinking of manners as well as education."

"Manners," repeated Mag suspiciously. "Like when you are introduced, you mean, and at the table?"

"Yes, table manners particularly."

"Why, I can't see that I eat different from the rest of you."

Peggy's gasp was altogether involuntary, called out by her amazement at the speaker's

blindness. And Mag, who if unobservant did not lack shrewdness, looked very much taken aback. Indeed that involuntary catch of the breath had told her more than Peggy could ever have brought herself to say in words.

"Well," she demanded, "what do I do that's so dreadful?"

"Well, to begin with," explained poor Peggy, wishing that this duty had devolved on someone who would mind it less, Priscilla, for instance, "People who are particular, use their knives to cut things. and for buttering their bread, but not—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Mag, coloring slightly. "I guess I forget sometimes. Is that all?"

"And they try," continued Peggy determinedly, "to make as little noise as possible while they are eating, and they don't drink from saucers—"

"When the coffee's hot, it scalds my throat," Mag defended herself. "And besides," she continued irritably, "it can't be the table manners that make me funny, for in the show I didn't

eat a thing, and the folks laughed every time I said boo."

Peggy swallowed. "If you want to know why the farmer seemed so funny to everybody," she said, "I think it's this. He was ignorant and behind the times, and yet was so well satisfied with himself."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mag roughly, "that's it, is it?"

"That's my opinion."

Mag stopped short. "You got up that show," she declared, her voice threatening. "Were you thinking about me when you wrote that farmer's part."

Peggy looked her in the eye, and the other's anger could not withstand her gaze. "No, Mag," she said simply, "I wasn't."

"But you think I'm like him."

Peggy hesitated. "You used to laugh at the girls a good deal," she acknowledged with an effort, "and criticize them."

"Then I *was* like him."

There was no answer. As Mag moved on, Peggy kept step with her, casting a troubled glance every now and then at the other's over-

cast face. She was hardly prepared for the bitterness in the girl's tone when at length she spoke.

"I guess I'll go back to the city. 'Tain't likely I'll get my job in the lunch room back, but there's plenty of work nowadays. When I come here I thought what they wanted was girls that were ready to do men's work, and not just ones who was posted on etiquette."

Peggy passed over the injustice of this. "Mag," she said quickly, "what did you enlist in the Land Army for?"

The tall girl beside her turned on her furiously. "Oh, you make me sick," she cried. "You've showed me up for a fool all right, but there ain't no way you can prove I ain't as good an American as your are."

"Then it was because—"

"Look here," panted Mag Whipple, "is this my country or ain't it? You think you highbrows, who talk Latin and use finger bowls, are the only ones who know what it is to love their country. Well, I'll tell you that's dead wrong. If I could change into a man so I could go out and fight, I'd do it in a minute, even if I knew

I'd never come back. And I jumped at this because it looked like it was a chance to help. And now—"

Her torrent of words stopped suddenly, checked by Peggy's joyous laughter. She drew her hand across her eyes, as if confused. And as it dropped heavily to her side again, Peggy caught it.

"I knew it, Mag Whipple," Peggy cried. "I just knew it. And now how dare you talk of deserting and going back to the city? You came in because you loved your country, and you can't stop being brave and splendid, and turn into a silly coward."

Mag began to cry.

"But I'm not like the rest of you, Peggy," she whimpered. "I don't know how to talk and I don't know how to act. All the girls but you look down on me and I guess they laugh at me behind my back. And I don't like to be laughed at."

"I don't suppose soldiers like to be shot at, but they don't run—except the cowards."

Mag was seeking vainly for a much-needed handkerchief. Peggy produced hers, slipped

it into the big, unsteady hand, patted the hand and went on.

"When we started the summer you knew lots of things about the farm that the rest of us didn't know, and we knew some things about grammar and table manners that you didn't know. We're trying to learn. Why don't you?"

"D'ye think I could?" demanded Mag in muffled tones, from behind the handkerchief.

"Of course you could. Just keep your eyes open and notice how other folks do things. I'll give you a hint if I see you are overlooking something."

"But I'm afraid I'm too old to learn to talk good."

Peggy laughed derisively. "Why, one of the text books we use in college was written by a man who was older than you are before he learned to read or write."

"Wouldn't that jar you?" murmured Mag. Her eyes met Peggy's and something of Peggy's radiant confidence seemed to flash from the blue eyes to the brown. Mag straightened herself. "I can learn if I want to," she exclaimed, as

if she defied some inner doubt. "I ain't nobody's fool." And though Peggy did not fail to notice the opportunity for a lesson in English "as she is spoke," she thought it wiser to postpone it.

Priscilla was in a rather unpleasant mood when Peggy returned not far from supper time. "You must have had a delightful afternoon," she sniffed.

"I did."

"Because you had such an agreeable companion, I suppose."

"The more I see of her, the better I like her," said Peggy with enthusiasm.

"Really, Peggy, when you talk that way, people can't feel that your friendship is much of a compliment. If you're going to like everybody—"

"Oh, I don't, of course. But when you get really acquainted with Mag—"

"Oh, please, hush," said Priscilla disagreeably and Peggy relapsed into a rather teasing silence. Some day she meant to tell Priscilla all about the new phase of Mag Whipple's development, but she guessed that for the moment

Priscilla would not be much interested. Moreover she could not help thinking that as a matter of discipline, it was just as well for Priscilla to be kept waiting.

CHAPTER XIV

ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE

The Monday following Peggy's talk with Mag Whipple was an unusually hard day, or at least, so Peggy thought it at the time. She recalled her feeling afterward with the incredulity with which we frequently look back on the occasions when we have been sorry for ourselves. There are certain troubles, which, like Pharaoh's lean kine, swallow all that go before, and make them as if they had never been.

Peggy came home Monday afternoon, tired, and hot and resentful. Her work that day had been on one of the farms decidedly unpopular among the girls of the Land Army. On their way home, they had compared notes, and all had the same story to tell. The gruffness of the farmer himself had been no more objectionable than the uncouth gallantry of the hired man. And as they were to work on the same farm

for the remainder of the week, the outlook was calculated to inspire gloom.

"I do hope we have a good dinner to-night," said Marian Keith to Peggy, who sat beside her on the front seat of the bus. "But I have a suspicion that it will be pork chops. Haven't you noticed that in perfectly boiling weather we're almost sure to have pork chops?"

With that pessimistic prophecy in her ears, Peggy, on entering the house, began to sniff the odors from the kitchen to satisfy herself as to the correctness of Marian's apprehension. But before she had had time to settle that vital point, Priscilla who had been assigned to K.P. duty for the day, seized her arm.

"Mrs. Lockwood has a telegram for you, Peggy. It didn't come till half an hour ago, or I should have tried to get it to you."

"A telegram," repeated Peggy, and forgot that she was tired. It was characteristic of her that she went cheerfully to find the matron. Outside of the business world, nine people out of ten who receive telegrams open them apprehensively and are relieved to find that they contain no bad news. But Peggy was so tempera-

mentally incapable of going ahead to meet trouble, that as she tore open the little yellow envelope, her face betrayed only pleased expectancy.

The telegram was not a long one, but it seemed to take Peggy a long time to read it. Indeed, as she stood with her eyes glued to the typewritten lines, the whole world was being readjusted. Priscilla saw the fresh color ebbing from her friend's face, leaving it ghastly under the tan, but even then she was not prepared to have Peggy turn to her with a moaning cry, and sink against her shoulder.

"Peggy!" gasped Priscilla, terrified. "Oh, Peggy darling." What the grief was that brought Peggy to her arms, Priscilla had no idea, and for the instant she did not even put the question to herself. The thing that made the sight of Peggy's suffering intolerable was the remembrance that on the day before she had been disagreeable. Poor Priscilla could not believe that this was not as vividly present to Peggy's thoughts as to her own.

Mrs. Lockwood turned from her desk and uttered an exclamation. The attitude of the

two girls told a story no one could misunderstand. "What has happened?" she cried.

The hand that held the telegram, fluttered, then raised itself slowly. Priscilla took the slip of paper from the shaking fingers and read the message aloud.

"Have you had any word from G—or do you know where he is. He has been absent from camp since Friday without leave.

"RUTH."

The eyes of Mrs. Lockwood and Priscilla met. The matron's asked a question which Priscilla's answered. Mrs. Lockwood sighed. She remembered the handsome young man in uniform and the devoted sister who had spent a Sunday with Peggy not long before.

"You poor child," she said and something in her sympathetic tone brought Peggy's head up from Priscilla's shoulder. White and shaking as she was, she faced the older woman steadily.

"It's not what you think," she said. "It's not as bad as that. It's only that—he's dead."

"Poor child," breathed Mrs. Lockwood again, and Priscilla began to cry. But Peggy's eyes were quite dry.

"Some boys would get sick of it all and desert," said Peggy. "They'd take it to heart if an officer was unreasonable, and they'd fret about the food and the things that were hard, and they'd work themselves up till some day they'd simply leave. But Graham's not made that way. He couldn't desert. If he's been away three days without leave, he must be—dead."

"Come to my room, where you won't be disturbed, dear, and lie down," said Mrs. Lockwood, her voice showing how profoundly she was moved. But the color was slowly coming back to Peggy's cheeks. "I must go home," she said. "Oh, Mrs. Lockwood, you'll let me go, won't you?"

"You shall go as soon as you are able, Peggy, but first you need rest."

Yielding as Peggy could be on occasion, she was adamant now. She longed for her mother. She wanted to be at Ruth's side, helping her to bear this overwhelming trouble with its intolerable mystery. For Peggy's usual hopefulness had strangely failed her at this crisis. She never doubted that Graham was dead.

Priscilla suggested accompanying her to the city. Mrs. Lockwood approved, but Peggy demurred. "I don't need anyone. I can go alone."

"Oh, Peggy, you are cruel," exclaimed Priscilla, again bursting into tears. For a moment she really thought Peggy was punishing her for the previous day. One look into Peggy's wondering eyes made her ashamed of her suspicion, but she could not stop crying.

"I don't mean to be cruel, Priscilla dear," Peggy said in a troubled tone. "But my going will leave you short-handed here, and it's such a busy time now."

"I'll take the early morning train back," cried Priscilla. "I'll do a full day's work tomorrow."

"But that will make such a hard day for you."

"I want it to be hard. I mean I don't care how hard it is." But in the first statement, Priscilla had spoken her real feelings. She had a certainty that she would never be at peace till she had punished herself for her treatment of Peggy the previous day.

The gong had sounded for dinner, but it was a question whether anything would be eaten. Thanks to that form of wireless which antedates Marconi's invention by the life-time of the human race, every one in the house knew that Peggy Raymond was in trouble, that she was going home, and that Priscilla was to accompany her, though only for overnight. Amy flew upstairs, disdaining the very thought of dinner. Mag Whipple tried to swallow and discovered a lump in her throat that made the operation difficult if not impossible. All around the table were solemn faces. The girls talked in low voices when they spoke, but they said little. Marian Keith, whose apprehensions in regard to pork chops had not been realized, and who had forgotten that such things ever mattered, was thankful to be summoned from a meal she had hardly tasted. It was Mrs. Lockwood who had sent for her. "Peggy plans to take the half past seven train," she said, "and Priscilla is going with her. Won't you hurry through your dinner and drive them to the station?"

"I've eaten all I can already. Oh, Mrs. Lock-

wood, what is it? Is any one sick or dead?"

"She thinks so," replied Mrs. Lockwood, and repeated the substance of Ruth's telegram. Marian went to bring out the bus, looking as pale as if the news had concerned herself directly.

It took some little time for Peggy to make her toilet. She had just come from a hard day's work. Her knees were shaky and her hands trembled so uncontrollably that she could hardly button her blouse. Amy and Priscilla took her in charge and dressed her as if she had been a baby, crying over her softly, and calling her all sorts of endearing names. Peggy was grateful for their help, responsive to their tenderness, but her composure frightened them. It was unnatural that they should be crying themselves blind over Peggy's trouble, while her eyes were clear and bright, and her lips wore that strange little smile.

The girls had finished dinner when Peggy came downstairs, and in spite of the heat of the evening, they had withdrawn into the big living-room and closed the doors, so that the hall and the porch were empty. Peggy appreciated

this bit of thoughtfulness. "How kind everyone is," she said gratefully. "Give them all my love, Amy, and say I shall come back to work as soon—as soon as I can."

Amy went with the others to the station. Peggy sat between her two friends, very self-contained and quiet. She had gone over the same road that morning, on her way to work, and again at night, and she seemed to herself many years older than the Peggy who had made jokes and had resented Farmer Peck's impertinence. And yet, even then, this terrible thing was true.

The bus reached the station twenty minutes early. "And probably the train will be twenty minutes late," Marian confided to Amy. "And the poor dear will have three quarters of an hour of being stared at." For though Amy and Priscilla showed traces of weeping, it was in Peggy's direction that the curious eyes were all turning.

But the train came in on time and Peggy and Priscilla got on board. Amy tried to smile as she waved her hand, but her face twisted grotesquely, and she burst out crying instead. She

ran to the bus and climbed in beside Marian.

"I don't see," she sobbed, as the train pulled out, "why if such things have to happen, they need to happen to people like Peggy Raymond."

"Do you suppose he *is* dead?" asked Marian, her voice betraying doubt.

"Peggy seems to think he must be."

"Well, perhaps that's natural, but you know if he got to drinking—"

"Graham doesn't drink. And even if he had before he put on the uniform, he wouldn't now. I've known Graham Wylie years and years, and while he's got faults enough, he'd never do anything like that."

"Sometimes," hinted Marian, "when boys get away from home and into bad company—"

"But Graham isn't the kind of boy to be led around. He's a born leader. If Graham disgraced himself, you couldn't excuse him as you would some boys. There's nothing of the weakling about him. Poor Ruth. I'm as sorry for her as I am for Peggy."

Peggy's mother knew of Ruth's telegram, so that Peggy's arrival did not take her by surprise. She hurried to the door at the sound

of footsteps and took her daughter in her arms. "My dear little girl," she said, her voice unsteady. For a moment it seemed intolerable to her that the chief burden of the cruel war should be borne by youth. It was the boys who were being killed. It was the girls whose plans for the future were wrecked. She strained Peggy to her, wishing as fathers and mothers have wished vainly for generations, that she could bear it all and let the young go free.

"I'll run over home and see the folks for a few minutes," said Priscilla, guessing that Peggy and her mother would be glad to be alone together for a little. And she was right, for there were some things Peggy wanted to know before she saw Ruth. "Tell me everything they've found out," she said as the door closed on Priscilla.

But Mrs. Raymond had little to tell, for, beyond the grim fact of Graham's disappearance, nothing had been learned. On Friday, late in the afternoon, several of his friends had seen him walking briskly toward the northern boundary of the camp, and he had stopped one of them to make an engagement for the eve-

ning, immediately after mess. That was the last time anyone had spoken to him. On Saturday, Nelson Hallowell, alarmed by Graham's continued absence, had obtained leave and gone straight to the Wylies, where his news brought consternation.

At once the search began. The police were notified, the hospitals searched. Various hypotheses which the authorities were considering were scouted by the family. It was out of the question that Graham had become intoxicated and was lying somewhere in a drunken stupor, oblivious to honor and duty. It was impossible that apprehension had turned his brain, as had happened occasionally with boys not so well balanced, and that he had wandered away temporarily irresponsible. No one who knew Graham could accept such an explanation, and yet it was equally impossible to believe that the earth had opened and swallowed him.

Peggy listened without comment to the meager details which only emphasized the baffling mystery. She had not taken off her hat. "I think I'd better see Ruth now," she said. "How is she standing it?"

"Wonderfully, everything considered, though she looks worn out, poor child. She wanted to telegraph you yesterday but we kept hoping that we would learn something definite, and that we might spare you the terrible suspense." Mrs. Raymond rose, adding, "I'll go over with you. Your father and Mr. Wylie are out together."

The sight of Ruth was good for Peggy. For several days Ruth had been under the strain of which Peggy had had only a taste. She had hardly slept since Nelson Hallowell had brought the news Saturday. Against Ruth's pallor, the blue veins in her temples showed distinctly, and her eyes were glassy and unnaturally large. There had always been a protecting fondness in Peggy's affection for Ruth, and now as she kissed her, she forgot her own trouble in the wish to be comforting.

It was strange how a common grief drew them all together. Peggy had always stood a little in awe of Graham's father, as much as Peggy could stand in awe of anyone. Yet when he came in about eleven o'clock in company with Mr. Raymond, it did not seem at all un-

natural to Peggy, after she had kissed her own father, to turn to Graham's father—incredibly aged since she had seen him last—and lift her cheek for his kiss. She checked the question that had risen to her lips after one glance at the man's weary face. But poor Ruth could not be so wise.

"Oh, father, haven't you found out something?"

"No, Ruth, nothing."

Peggy gave Ruth's arm a gentle pressure, as she saw her about to speak again, and Ruth's parted lips closed without a word. And then, moving like an old man, Mr. Wylie went up to his wife's room. Mrs. Wylie, never strong at the best of times, had been in bed all day in accordance with the doctor's orders.

It had been decided that Peggy should spend the night with Ruth, and as the girls went to their room, Peggy realized she could help Ruth most by going to sleep herself, not an easy thing to accomplish when every nerve was taut. She struggled to compose herself. She tried to pray, but so firmly had the conviction of Graham's death taken hold of her that it seemed

a mockery to pray that he might be living. And then she gave up the effort to find the words she wanted, and let herself rest on the certainty of the divine compassion, the love that makes all things, even heartbreak and loss, work together for good.

After an hour or two she dozed fitfully. Again and again, just as her thoughts were growing hazy, Ruth's tense voice would say, "Peggy, do you suppose—" and then would follow some torturing hypothesis, showing how constantly the poor girl's thoughts were busy with the problem of Graham's disappearance. But toward morning, worn out by her long watching, Ruth, too, fell asleep.

CHAPTER XV

A LETTER

Peggy's stay at home was limited to three days, and its brevity would have surprised her friends less, could they have known how endless each day seemed. Peggy and Ruth went through the familiar routine of sitting down to the table three times a day, and trying to eat, of going to bed at night and trying to sleep. And all the time their spirits were straining expectantly toward the future, waiting for news. If the door bell rang, their hearts jumped. The tinkle of the telephone brought them hurrying, faint with mingled apprehension and hope. But the door bell was only the gas bill, or the boy to collect for the paper, and the telephone call was from some neighbor to ask if they had heard anything. There never was any news.

On the afternoon of the third day Peggy announced her decision. "Ruth, I think we'd both be better for getting back to work."

"Work!" repeated Ruth, her tone suggesting that she shrank from the prospect.

"Yes, I know *I* must. If you're working as hard as you possibly can, and going home at night so tired that you ache from head to foot, you're bound to sleep; you can't help it. But this waiting—it's killing."

"I don't know how I can go back to the store," Ruth said piteously, "and have people looking at me the way they do, and perhaps asking me about Graham. It doesn't seem as if I could bear it."

Peggy sighed. "Yes, I know. But the way I feel, anything will be easier than this."

"If we were only sure—of anything," Ruth went on, the ready tears starting, "it wouldn't be so hard. Of course when Graham enlisted we knew he might never come back. But not to know anything—just to be in the dark—"

"We'll have to remember," Peggy said slowly, "that we're not the only ones, that there are any number of women who never will know any more than we do now." For the past three days she had been haunted by the thought of them, the tens of thousands of women, mothers,

sisters, wives, and sweethearts, who only knew that their dear ones were "missing." Peggy dared not let herself fancy going on through the years without knowing, with hope growing fainter and feebler all the time, yet never quite dying. In the warm summer sunshine she shivered uncontrollably.

Reluctant as Ruth was to present herself again before Mr. Flynn's unsympathetic gaze, and perhaps be compelled to answer the questions of the curious, she at length acknowledged that Peggy was right. For people in trouble there is nothing like work, the harder the work and the more exacting, the better. Peggy telegraphed Marian to meet her and took the evening train. To avoid the ordeal of questioning, which she felt would be more than she could bear, she closed the telegram with the words, "We have heard nothing."

On the train she laid out a program for herself. She remembered reading how generally since the outbreak of the war, the women of England had discarded the wearing of black for their dead, that the courage of the nation might not be impaired by constant reminders of

loss. That was one of the sacrifices the times demanded, Peggy realized, that one's sorrow should be borne without a sign. In this saddened world, where buoyancy and hope had become so precious, she had no right to sigh, even if she could no longer sing.

As was to be expected certain girls at the Poplars found Peggy hard to understand. Her prompt return to work, her quiet self-control which could have passed for cheerfulness with the unobservant, impressed them as almost unfeeling. On the second evening after Peggy's return, when none of the Friendly Terrace girls happened to be on the porch, Laura Kendall brought up the subject.

"As I understand it, they weren't exactly engaged," she said. "And it's plain enough that she really didn't care for him. If she had, you know, she couldn't possibly act the way she does."

"She's as sweet as she can be," patronizingly remarked another girl in the group, "but sometimes, you know, girls of that sort are just a little bit superficial."

Priscilla was just coming out upon the porch

and stopped short in the doorway. Though she had not heard the previous conversation, and no names had been mentioned in the fragments that had come to her ears, she had no difficulty in conjecturing of whom the girls were speaking. There was a roaring in Priscilla's ears. She stood with her hands clenched, her anger producing a temporary paralysis so that she could neither move nor speak.

It is needless to say that neither of the remarks above quoted had been addressed to Mag Whipple. But it was Mag who answered them. "You talk like a pair of fools," she cried roughly. "Just because she don't go 'round whining and grouching like you would yourselves, you think she don't care. If you weren't as blind as bats, you could see that her heart was aching day and night, and she just smiles so as not to make the rest of us sorry."

Mag had been Peggy's first champion, but she was not to be the last. "I think you are quite right, Mag," Marian Keith said quietly. "Peggy Raymond is the bravest girl I know, and I'm sure she's anything but superficial."

"I think Mag's right in saying that Peggy

is trying to be cheerful for the sake of the rest of us," declared Minna Eichenberger. "It's like her unselfishness to share her good times with everybody and keep her troubles to herself."

"Sometimes I wonder how long she's going to be able to keep it up," Alice Cameron contributed. "I never saw a girl change so in so short a time."

Laura seemed rather taken aback by the comments called forth by her speech. "Why, I didn't mean to criticize Peggy," she protested. "I like her awfully. But I thought the way she was acting showed she hadn't really cared for the man."

Mag Whipple emitted a snort of disgust, rose noisily, and went indoors. In the dark passage way she collided with Priscilla, and stopped with an exclamation.

"It's only me," whispered Priscilla, discarding grammar temporarily, and a prejudice permanently. She put her arms about Mag and kissed her. "Thank you," she breathed in her ear.

"They make me sick," declared Mag, too

angry to be flattered. "If 'twas them it would take all the rest of us to fan 'em, and hold the camphor to their noses. If they talk any more of that kind of stuff before me, I'll tell 'em something that'll give 'em a good earache." She marched off, and Priscilla could not help thinking that under certain circumstances, one who is not quite a lady has undeniable advantages.

Out of each busy day Ruth and Peggy found time to write each other. Ruth admitted that after the first plunge, she found it a relief to be at work again. "Mr. Flynn seems almost human," she wrote in her first letter. "I know he's sorry, but he doesn't say so." And the next letter contained a sentence which went to Peggy's heart, she understood the feeling so perfectly. "The worst time in the whole day is when I go home at night. It seems such an age since I left in the morning, I can't possibly believe that they haven't heard something."

Peggy had dreaded the leisure of Sunday and she hailed it as providential when the cook developed a headache, and in the middle of break-

fast gave up work for the day. Peggy promptly volunteered for duty, but Mrs. Lockwood hesitated.

"Are you sure you wouldn't be better for resting, my dear? Pluck can do a great deal, but it has its limitations."

"Oh, I couldn't rest. I'm all right as long as I can keep busy."

"Have it your own way, then." And as Peggy smiled and turned away, Mrs. Lockwood's eyes suddenly filled with tears.

Thanks to her absorbing duties in the kitchen, Peggy got through Sunday reasonably well, and Monday the work of another strenuous week began. She came home that night to find several letters awaiting her, and she tore Ruth's open at once, even though she could almost have repeated the closing lines *verbatim,* before she read them. "There is no news, not the ghost of a clew, and this is the ninth day."

As a rule the girls' letters waited for a reading till after dinner, as the time intervening between their return and the serving of the evening meal, was none too long for freshening up after a day of labor in the fields. After din-

ner as the girls flocked to the porch, Peggy went upstairs for her knitting. She was about to go down to rejoin the group outside, when Marian Keith appeared, a letter in her hand.

"Wait, Peggy," she said in a voice which shook uncontrollably. "I've a letter here which might interest you."

For all of Peggy's valiant efforts to "look out and not in," her grief was inevitably absorbing, and she failed to notice Marian's agitation. "Hadn't we better go downstairs where it's cooler," she suggested.

"I—I think not. I mean I don't care to read it to everyone."

"Oh, I see," Peggy exclaimed, and as in the dormitory, chairs were conspicuous by their absence, she sat down on the edge of her cot, Marian seating herself on the cot adjoining. In the dim evening light, her face looked unnaturally white.

"This letter is from my cousin Roger," she explained, smoothing the folded sheets nervously. "He's in the service and just now stationed in a camp somewhere out west."

"He writes very nice thick letters for a

mere cousin," Peggy said with a faint smile.

"Well, he had something especial to tell me. It's the part I thought would interest you, Peggy," Marian fluttered the pages with unsteady fingers. "Oh, yes, here it is." She darted a glance at Peggy, who with the industry characteristic of the times, had already started her knitting, and began to read, her hurried breathing making enunciation difficult.

"We have just had the most exciting experience here. For a week or more we have been guarding the railway tunnel, just outside the city, and when I went on guard to-day, I found Watson, the chap I was to relieve, the color of chalk. I asked him if he was sick. He said no, and then he asked a question that made me feel rather queer. 'Say, Keith, do you believe in ghosts?' It wasn't the question so much as the way he asked it that gave me a shivery feeling along my spine, but of course I tried to laugh it off. I asked him if he had been seeing things.

"'No, I haven't seen anything,' said Watson, 'but I've heard something—something like a groan.' He gave me a look out of the tail of his eye and added, 'I wonder if it's a sign.'

"Of course I told him he was a chump, but I felt a little worried. For when a fellow has just started on his training and begins to hear things, it's a pretty good sign he won't last. And while I was calling

him down good and proper, something happened that put a period to my eloquence, for I heard the sound myself. 'There,' said Watson, looking at me, 'what did I tell you?'

"I began to look around. There wasn't a human being in sight but Watson and myself. There wasn't a tree within a hundred yards, just a level stretch of sandy soil with a clump of weeds here and there. A few freight cars stood on a siding and I walked over in that direction, because they were the only things in sight big enough to hide a man. And then I heard the sound again, but plainer. 'It's in this car,' I shouted to Watson.

Peggy's knitting fell from her hands to the floor. But her fingers kept on moving mechanically. Marian hesitated for an instant, then continued, controlling her voice with an effort.

"Watson came running when he saw what I was going to do. 'That car is officially sealed,' he called. 'You'll get into trouble if you break in.' If he'd told me that I'd be hung if I opened it, I should have gone ahead just the same. And it didn't take long to make Watson feel the same way, either.

"Marian, there was a man in that car, a young chap in uniform, bound, gagged, unconscious. His face was badly bruised, though whether he had been roughly handled before he was thrown in, or whether it was the result of battering around in an empty box

car, unable to help himself, no one can say. And there is no way to tell where the poor fellow came from, for everything that would help to identify him was removed. The cars came from the east, so he must have been picked up somewhere between here and the Atlantic coast, though that's not very definite."

Marian stole a half frightened glance at Peggy. She was listening fixedly, with a curious, strained expression as if she were hearing some foreign language she knew only imperfectly. Her fingers still moved as if she were knitting. Marian began to doubt the wisdom of the course she had taken, but she went on reading, because she could not think of anything else to do.

"Of course we lost no time hustling the poor chap to the base hospital, and the surgeons and nurses are all doing their best for him. He's a big fellow, as tall as I am, and broad shouldered. He's only skin and bones at present—there's no knowing how long he's been shut up—in that infernal box car—but in spite of that and his bruises, you can see that he has regular features, and must be mighty good looking when he's not starved to death. If you see anything in the papers up your way about a missing soldier, this fellow has heavy brown hair and gray eyes and

on his left temple a queer little scar like the letter V—"

"Graham," Peggy cried. "Graham! Graham!" And for the first time in her life, she fainted away.

CHAPTER XVI

A HERO OF THEIR OWN

It was a question whether there would be any sleep at the Poplars that night. Peggy's faint lasted only a moment, but when she came to herself, the house echoed with the sound of hurrying feet. Before she was able to sit up, Priscilla had rushed to the telephone and put in a long distance call for the Wylies.

Thanks to the detailed description given in Marian's letter, there could be little doubt that the unconscious soldier found in the locked freight car was Graham. Mr. Wylie telegraphed the authorities of the base hospital to which his son had been taken, telegraphed the commanding officer of the camp where Graham was under suspicion of being a deserter, and took the midnight train for the west.

Peggy did not sleep that night. The picture of Graham bound and gagged, his handsome face bruised, his splendid frame wasted, was

continually before her. The surgeons and nurses were doing their best for him, Roger Keith had written, but evidently he did not feel sure their best would save him. It was small wonder that Peggy could not sleep. The tears that had been so slow to come to her relief ran over her cheeks and wet her pillow. Priscilla lying in the next cot, reached across the narrow space between the two beds, found Peggy's hand and held it. And forty miles away, Ruth, too, lay awake praying for Graham's life.

The panacea on which Peggy had relied—hard work—is an admirable remedy in many cases, but she had taken an over-dose. In combination with the shocks of the past week, and her loss of sleep, it had been too much even for Peggy's sturdy constitution. In the morning she could not lift her head from the pillow.

Priscilla and Amy, after a consultation with Mrs. Lockwood, volunteered to change places with two of the girls assigned for the day to K.P. duty. And as the hardest farm work was really more popular with the girls of the Land Army than prosaic household tasks, their offer was joyfully accepted. Peggy's friends were

confident that they could do the work and keep an eye on Peggy. They did not need to be told how much it would mean to her to have them near her.

When they brought up her luncheon, if her cup of tea and single slice of toast deserves so ceremonious a name, Peggy looked gratefully from one to the other.

"It makes me feel fairly selfish," she said, "to have both of you with me, while poor Ruth hasn't any one."

"There's no doubt that you're a monster of selfishness," Amy said severely. "And for punishment you've got to eat every bit of this toast, hasn't she, Priscilla?"

"Every crumb," declared Priscilla with equal sternness.

But though Peggy bravely tried to do what was expected of her, a mouthful of the toast was all she could force herself to swallow. She drank the tea thirstily, and lay back on her pillow looking so white and wan that it was hard to believe she had done a man's work in the fields only the previous day.

"I wonder if she ought to have a doctor,"

Priscilla said anxiously as they went downstairs.

"What could a doctor do for Peggy? He'd probably say for her to take a tonic, and he'd give the same tonic to a girl who had been to a dance every night for a week. If you're heartsick about something, I can't see that it will help any to put a pill in your stomach."

The tonic that was to help Peggy arrived the next day. Priscilla took it up to her, looking as pale as Peggy herself.

"Peggy, it's a telegram."

Peggy raised herself in bed, and held out her hand. Then as if her strength had failed—or perhaps it was her courage—her arm dropped heavily and she sank back, closing her eyes. "I guess you'll have to read it to me, Priscilla," she said faintly.

"Oh—all right." Priscilla's attempt to speak carelessly was not successful. She tore open the envelope and drew out the enclosure with such an unsteady hand that she was in mortal fear of Peggy's opening her eyes, and asking why she was trembling so. As she

scanned the message a moment, her nerves played her false, and phrases of ominous import danced before her eyes. Then her brain steadied and she saw the words clearly.

"Graham conscious. Condition most encouraging. Letter follows.

"N. D. Wylie."

"Oh, I'm going to get up," cried Peggy, raising herself in bed. "I'm going to dress and go to work. I'm cured, Priscilla." And all at once she was weeping convulsively.

"You've got to stop crying, Peggy Raymond," scolded Priscilla, "or I won't let you up for a week. Oh, please don't cry," she implored, quite unconscious that the tears were running from her own eyes, and sprinkling the coverlet.

"I—I—was only thinking, Priscilla," Peggy sobbed, "how many girls hear such different news. It seems as if I could never be good enough to deserve it."

Though Peggy did not rise and dress immediately, and did not go to work the next day, her convalescence dated from the moment the

telegram with the encouraging news arrived. And Mr. Wylie's letter which came twenty-four hours after his wire, completed the cure. Peggy read that letter again and again, and her glowing face would have served as a model to an artist wishing to paint a symbolic figure of Happiness.

The letter more than confirmed the good news of the telegram. Graham's complete recovery was no longer in doubt. But though this alone would have made the world a joyful place for Peggy, that was not all. Peggy had risen and dressed about noon that day, and after dinner, disregarding the protests of those who feared she was over-doing, she carried Priscilla and Amy off to the remotest corner of the grounds to share with them the wonderful news.

"I've got something to read you girls," she informed them. "Mr. Wylie said I might, and that's lucky for it's such a glorious secret, I believe I should have died if I had had to keep it to myself."

The girls dropped upon the grass and composed themselves to listen while Peggy, all smiles, unfolded her precious letter.

"I read you the part about his being better, and what the doctor said about his constitution. But the rest I had to keep till now, because in a way it's a secret. Listen." And then while her friends hung on her words, Peggy began reading.

"Of course you have asked yourself many times the explanation of this outrage. For the present the Government is anxious to keep it very quiet, as the publication of all the facts might put some unprincipled plotters on their guard. But it is only right that you should know, Peggy, what reason we have to be proud of our boy. And I suggest that you take Priscilla and Amy into your confidence. They have been Graham's friends from childhood, and moreover, they are the sort of girls who know how to hold their tongues."

"Hear that," Amy broke in jubilantly. "If the rest of your letter is as nice as the start, Peggy—"

"Sh!" frowned Priscilla. "Don't interrupt." And as Amy subsided, with a grimace which might have been intended as an apology, Peggy's eager voice went on.

"By a fortunate accident, fortunate though it so

nearly cost him his life, Graham became aware that there were traitors in the camp. Something he picked up gave him a clew as to their place and hour of meeting, and he resolved to be as near as possible and try to overhear something. He heard enough to hang the three men whom he suspected, but unluckily just as they were about to disperse, a dog, a camp mascot, came along and by his actions revealed Graham's hiding place. The men fell upon him and he was severely beaten. He lost consciousness but he is of the opinion that he was not placed on the empty freight car till sometime during the night.

"I will not harrow your feelings, my dear girl, by going into details regarding what he endured that terrible week. But this I want you to know, that when he recovered consciousness about two hours before my arrival, his first words were to ask for the commanding officer. They tried to quiet him, but he was so insistent, that at length one of the surgeons offered to take any message to the General. And as a result of that warning, a transport already a half day out of New York, was recalled by wireless, till they had secured from her coal bunkers bombs enough to send our entire fleet to the bottom of the Atlantic. Since then, the men whom Graham overheard are under such constant surveillance that they cannot possibly do any harm, and it is hoped that there will be several other fish in the net before it is hauled in.

"Have just asked Graham if he has any message to send you. He grinned at me, the young rascal,

and said, 'Give her all my love.' According to that I don't know where Dad comes in.

"N. D. WYLIE."

As Peggy's breathless voice came to a halt, she let the letter drop into her lap and looked at her two friends with a radiant pride and joy that would have insured a response from a pair of graven images. And as Amy and Priscilla had known Graham since the days when he wore short trousers, and turn-over collars, and loved his sister only next to Peggy herself, their enthusiasm measured up to the high standard of Peggy's expectations. Friendly Terrace had a hero all its own. They could not stop talking about it.

"They give crosses and things to soldiers who killed a lot of people," said Amy. "I think Graham ought to have something a great deal better for saving so many lives."

Priscilla agreed with her. "I'm sure none of them could have suffered more than Graham did that dreadful week. Think of being tied up so you couldn't move hand or foot." She checked herself as Peggy shuddered uncontrollably.

"Do you know," Peggy said in a low voice, "that sometimes I'm afraid to go to sleep for fear I'll dream of it. The only thing that makes it endurable is knowing that it is all over. But in a dream, you know, we see things, and can't help them. I don't know what will happen if I ever dream of that freight car."

During this little speech, which was sufficiently unlike Peggy to surprise her hearers, Priscilla had seemed uneasy. "Listen," she exclaimed as Peggy finished, "I think you ought to go home, and take a long rest."

Peggy laughed derisively. "I'm going to work to-morrow."

"Oh, that's all very well to say, Peggy, as if will power could do everything. You've worked awfully hard all summer and then this dreadful nervous strain came, when you were all tired out, and now it's plain that you're almost at the end of your rope. You need a holiday."

"I'm going to take one, when Graham comes home. But up till then I shan't lose a minute. If I've got to live up to Graham," Peggy added

with a pride that was irresistible, "I mustn't be a slacker."

"Slacker," scoffed Amy. "You!" And Priscilla said anxiously, "Well, if you won't rest till Graham comes, I hope they'll send him home in a day or two."

That wish, which Peggy's heart echoed, was not destined to fulfillment. For though to Graham's family and friends it seemed the fitting thing that he should be nursed back to health in his father's house, the military authorities saw it in a different light. After a week Mr. Wylie returned home and devoted himself to his neglected business. Two more weeks passed, each longer than its predecessor, in spite of the fact that Graham's letters were now coming regularly. And then one day Peggy received the news for which she had been waiting. Graham had been granted a week's leave of absence, before reporting for duty

Peggy's departure on this occasion was very different from the other, when she had slipped away with hardly a good-by, convinced in her own mind that Graham was dead. This leave-taking was made a gala occasion. As Peggy

was to take the seven-thirty evening train, first doing a full day's work and taking dinner at the Poplars, a special spread was prepared in honor of the event. The girls ordered chicken and ice cream, a waste of money as far as Peggy was concerned, for she was altogether too happy to know or care what she was eating. As many girls as the bus would hold went down to the train to see her off, presenting her at the last minute with an almost embarrassingly large bouquet of roses.

For all her joyful excitement, Peggy was not too absorbed to fail to take pleasure in the fact that Mag Whipple was one of those included in the number who had come to the station. And in the midst of the hilarity and fun, she found time for a word in Mag's ear. "I'm sorry to run away and leave you after I promised to help you. But you are getting along so splendidly that you hardly need me."

"I guess I need somebody, all right," Mag replied. "And there ain't—isn't nobody—anybody like you. But Priscilla's going to look after my manners while you're away. Funny," Mag added reflectively, "I used to think she

was so stuck on herself—I mean—well, you know what I mean—and now I think she's the nicest girl I know, next to you."

The train whistled in the distance. The kissing began. Peggy climbed aboard at last, quite out of breath, her face as pink as her roses. Her color deepened as she heard someone explaining to an old lady who wanted to know what the matter was, that it was only a bridal party. Peggy wondered whether the non-appearance of the bridegroom would lead the speaker to correct her statement, but apparently this slight omission passed without detection.

Peggy's brother Dick was at the station to meet her, an unbelievably tall, slender Dick, whose voice cracked queerly every now and then. There was a peculiar excitement in his manner due, Peggy had no doubt, to the fact that Graham was expected on the morrow. She noticed the same subdued excitement in her mother's manner, when she reached home, and interpreted it in the same way.

"What perfectly beautiful flowers!" said Mrs. Raymond, taking up the cluster, which

Peggy with great foresight had deposited on the floor, before flinging herself in her mother's arms. "I'll put them in water. Dick, carry Peggy's suit-case up to her room. You'd better go with him, dear, and take off your things."

After the bare dormitory at the Poplars, the little upstairs room seemed fairly luxurious. Peggy passed her hand lovingly over the wall paper, and had to restrain herself from embracing her pet rocking chair.

"I'll be down in a minute," she called after Dick. "I'm not going to waste any time primping this evening."

"I suppose you think it'll pay better to-morrow," Dick answered, and Peggy could hear him chuckling all the way downstairs, over this thunderbolt of wit.

Peggy was as good as her word. Two minutes after Dick's noisy descent to the first floor, she followed him. "Where *is* everybody?" she called, as she reached the hall below, for rather oddly, both her mother and Dick had disappeared.

No one answered, and Peggy turned to the living room on the right. The folding doors

were closed which impressed Peggy as rather singular on so warm a night. She threw them open, crying challengingly, "What are you doing? Are you trying to hide from me?"

Her mother had just been in the room, she saw, for there in a big vase on the center table were her pink roses. A figure rose from the arm chair in the corner and stood erect. Peggy moved slowly toward it. The lights were turned low, but she saw the hollow cheeks, the gauntness of the frame, and an emotion stronger than she had ever known, something that stirred the very depths of her nature, swept her toward him. "Oh, Graham!" Peggy cried, and ran into his arms.

CHAPTER XVII

PEGGY ACTS AS BRIDESMAID

"I DON'T think it's fair," cried Peggy, apropos of nothing.

Graham, who sat near the window, turned and gave his attention to the landscape. "If you're referring to the weather, my dear Peggy, I can't agree with you. The weather man's prediction for to-day was fair and warmer, I believe, and for once he seems correct."

Peggy laughed. However devoted a lover Graham might be, he still remained a tease, and she accepted his teasing with more than resignation. For if the truth be told, the earnest, ardent Graham, whose eyes said so much more than his lips, sometimes seemed almost a stranger, while the teasing, irrepressible Graham was a dear, familiar friend.

"As it happens I'm not talking about the weather," explained Peggy. "I was only thinking that the dreadful week, when we didn't

know what had become of you, seemed a year long. And this week, when every minute is precious, there's hardly time enough between breakfast and bedtime to turn around. And it's not fair. If only the happy hours dragged till it seemed as if they would never end, and the unhappy ones fairly flew, it would be better all around."

"By Jove, this week's half gone already," Graham exclaimed, his manner indicating that he shared Peggy's sentiments. "Wonder if we can't bribe Father Time to put on the brakes for the next few days."

A taxicab turned the corner, the driver sounding his horn repeatedly and the noise again drew Graham's eyes to the window. "Hello," he exclaimed in accents of the utmost disapproval, "you're going to have company."

"Company," cried Peggy with a dismay inconsistent with her hospitable nature. Hastily she approached the window. Without any question the taxicab was stopping before the house. A young man in uniform stepped out, assisted a smartly dressed young woman to alight, and then stood with his back to the

house, puffing a cigarette, while his companion came up the walk.

"It's some mistake," said Peggy, cheerful again. "They aren't people we know." She went to the door without giving the new arrival time to ring, and the girl, who was reaching for the bell, turned quickly. At the sight of Peggy a radiant smile illumined her face. Peggy caught her breath.

"Oh," she gasped, "You're—you're—"

"To be sure I am," Isabel Ewing acknowledged cheerfully. "But I had to look twice to know you, Peggy. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"I've had some things that worried me, but I'm all right now. Come in, Isabel."

Isabel entered. "I want a little talk with you," she said, "and I don't care to have that handsome young soldier I saw in the window listening to every word. Who is he, by the way—your brother?"

"No," said Peggy, blushing rosily. "He's the brother of one of my dearest friends. Would you mind coming up to my room?" she hurried on. "We'll be alone there."

"Just the thing," Isabel replied, and Peggy led the way to the modest little room which Isabel honored with an approving glance. "I should know you lived here," she said, as she seated herself in the willow rocker. "It looks like you. And now listen, Peggy. I'm going across."

"You mean—"

"Well, an aunt of mine, Lady Clement, is doing relief work on a rather big scale and she's written to me several times about coming over and helping her. I've got quite an income of my own, you see, and she's interested in getting hold of that, as well as in my personal assistance. And I'm going. At least it's a new sensation, till the novelty wears off."

"Stop talking that way," Peggy blazed out. "I didn't believe you before when you sneered at yourself, and now it's more absurd than ever. You're going to do something splendid and it's a shame to pretend that you're only trying to find a new way of killing time."

Isabel listened to this spirited defense of her motives with a queer little smile. "Maybe you're right, Peggy," she said. "This de-

veloping a soul is rather perplexing and there are so few precedents to guide one. Undine is the only recorded instance that I know of." She made an airy gesture, as if she waved the topic away. "Let's not waste any more time talking of this. I sail day after to-morrow, but first I'm going to be married."

"Oh, Isabel."

"At St. Stephen's, to-day at noon."

Peggy was looking anxious. "Isabel, you're not—"

Isabel made no pretense of not understanding. "Yes and no," she replied. "It's not an elopement exactly, because we're both of age, and the families on both sides are crazy for the match. But no one knows we're going to do it but yourself and the rector and the clerk who gave Bobby the license."

"Bobby! Why then—"

"Yes, Bobby Fitz-Maurice, but don't look shocked. You see, if he was a slacker, so was I, and neither of us can call the other names. Beside Bobby has reformed, just as I have. He's in uniform or I never should have said yes."

"Oh, Isabel!" Peggy found her eyes filling

with tears, she did not know exactly why. Isabel patted her hand.

"Now to business, Peggy dear. I've come to ask you to be my bridesmaid."

"Me! Why, there must be lots of girls—"

"Listen, Peggy. If I were going to be married the regular way, flower girls, bridesmaids, veil, wedding march, presents, honeymoon trip and all the rest of the fuss and feathers, I don't suppose I should have thought of you in connection with it. But nobody can tell whether Bobby and I will have more than two days together. All the silly splurge we've tacked on the weddings seems rather out of place under such circumstances, but I tell you honestly, Peggy, that it will be a comfort to me to have you near."

"Then I'll come, of course. But I've never been a bridesmaid before and you'll have to tell me what to do."

"Oh, there won't be a thing for you to do. I'm going to be married in this rig I have on. It's just this, Peggy, you're one of the real people, and the things you care about are the real things, and—I couldn't make it

plain if I talked all day, but anyway, I want you."

"I hope I've something fit to wear, Isabel," said Peggy with an anxiety that showed her a normal girl. "You see I've been in overalls all summer, and I had only one or two little tub dresses in the spring." She opened the door of her closet and displayed her modest wardrobe. Isabel looked over the little frocks with discerning eyes.

"You'll be wonderful in this blue," she pronounced judicially. "Now have you a big black hat?"

"Yes, of the last year's vintage. But I guess it will do."

Isabel set Peggy's anxiety at rest by approving the hat. "You'll be a love of a bridesmaid," she said reassuringly. "And now shall we take along the handsome brother of your dearest friend as best man?"

Peggy jumped at the suggestion. She had a feeling that she would not feel so strange, acting as Isabel Ewing's bridesmaid, if Graham at the same time was serving Bobby FitzMaurice in the capacity of best man. "But

perhaps Mr. Fitz-Maurice would rather have somebody else."

"Bobby's leaving everything to me. It's funny the confidence he has in me, Peggy. And I never would have believed he would care so much for anyone." Isabel darted a suspicious glance in Peggy's direction. "You're not laughing, Peggy?"

"Laughing! Why, Isabel, why should I laugh?"

"Of course not, I forgot you were Peggy. Let's go downstairs and inform your friend's brother of the honor in store for him. And then we'll have Bobby come inside while you dress."

The next few hours seemed as unreal as something seen in a moving picture. Peggy could hardly believe she was not dreaming when she found herself standing at Isabel Ewing's side, while the rector of St. Stephen's read the marriage service. After the brightness of the sunny outdoor world, the church seemed dark and cool and the rector's deep tones echoed solemnly in the empty building. Isabel gave the response clearly, but Bobby Fitz-Maurice's

voice was husky and he spoke hardly above a whisper. A wedding breakfast had been ordered in a private room in the most exclusive hotel in the city. Peggy would have begged off from this, but she saw that Isabel was puzzled, almost hurt by her hesitation, and she accepted that as part of the unexpected duties of this surprising day. And after the long and elaborate meal was over they drove to the station with the newly made husband and wife and saw them off on the New York train.

Isabel held Peggy fast when it came time for the good-bys. "You don't know how much it meant to me to have you with me to-day," she whispered.

"Oh, Isabel, I'm so glad, and so proud that you should have wanted me."

The two girls kissed each other tenderly and cried a little. And then the new husband, looking much handsomer, Peggy thought, in uniform than in his golf suit, took Isabel by the arm and led her gently away. Peggy was inclined to believe him much luckier than he deserved to be, but with her customary optimism she found herself hoping that the war and the

wife he had won would together make a man of Bobby Fitz-Maurice.

"Well, Peggy," said Graham's voice in her ear. "How does the plebeian street-car appeal to you after all this scooting around in taxi-cabs? Too much of a come-down?"

"I wouldn't mind walking home, Graham, unless you thought it would be too much for you."

"I shall be back in camp in three days, my dear girl, and a half mile walk ought not to floor me."

They strolled out of the station and made their leisurely way homeward, occasionally making a remark which showed that the minds of both were still busy with the day's guests. And then Peggy fell into an abstracted silence anything but characteristic. Graham watched her averted profile with a little wonder, and still more amusement. He had a teasing speech upon his lips but he was destined never to utter it, for when at length Peggy turned and met his humorous gaze, she blushed vividly. And though she did not lower her eyes, the waves of color continued to mount to the roots of her hair.

Graham was a young man of quick intuitions. "I was just going to offer you a penny for your thoughts," he said, "but I'm pretty sure I know them, without the penny."

Apparently Peggy did not doubt it. "I was only wondering," she said simply, "if it would be a comfort to you."

"A comfort!" Graham repeated. "You blessed little—" He did not find the word he wanted at once, and when he finished his sentence, it was not as Peggy had expected. "You blessed little—temptress."

"Oh!" murmured Peggy, wrinkling her brows, "then you mean—"

"Listen, Peggy! I have a hunch that I've had my dose at the start out and that now I'm going through this war without a scratch. But I may be wrong. I may come home with my nose shot away."

"I *do* love your nose, Graham. I think it's adorable. But if you suppose your nose is the thing I care for most—"

"And there are other possibilities," continued Graham. "A man who comes back a helpless cripple to the girl who married him

just as he put on the uniform, would wish that his friends, the enemy, had done a more thorough job.'

"But Graham—"

"There aren't any 'buts' in this case, Peggy. I won't do it, that's all. Some fellows have to tie their girls up with a wedding ring to be sure of them, but that's not the case with me."

"Of course not, Graham. But if you're sure of me anyway, why shouldn't we be—married? It wouldn't make me any more yours or you any more mine than we are anyway. It would just show people that we belong to each other."

"Peggy darling, when you look like that it would be hard enough to say no to you if you were asking me to cut off my right hand. And when we're talking of this particular thing, it's a million times harder. But just the same I'm going to keep on saying no to the end of the chapter. There isn't happiness enough this side of Heaven, my girl, to bribe me to take the risk of being thrown back on your hands a wreck of a man. I'll never forget that you were ready, and if anything could make me love you better, that would. But I'd despise my-

self if I took you at your word, and that settles it."

Graham was white with feeling. His tone before he finished was brusque, almost rough. But if Peggy did not understand all it cost him to veto her suggestion, she realized that it was of her he was thinking and that he had said no because he loved her better than himself. And though neither of them spoke again on the walk home it was only because they understood each other so well that words were unnecessary.

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO'S COMPANY

On Saturday Ruth got off at one o'clock. A girl who worked for a real estate man in the next block, and who often fell in with Ruth on her way down town in the morning, intercepted her just as she left the store, pinning her hat in place on the way.

"I'm flush to-day," announced Ruth's friend. "Let's have luncheon at the tea room. My treat."

"It's awfully sweet of you to ask me," smiled Ruth. "But I'm going home to luncheon. You know my brother's here on leave and I want to see all of him that I possibly can."

"Of course you do," the other cried heartily. "We'll go over to the tea room another Saturday. They've the nicest deviled crabs there that I've ever eaten."

Ruth made no answer, for at the moment she caught sight of her car. She shot toward the

corner, turning as she climbed aboard to wave her hand. Crabs! As though crabs or anything else could tempt her to miss a minute of Graham's society.

Luncheon was ready when Ruth reached home, but the table was set for two. Ruth turned a blank face to her mother. "Why—why, where's Graham?"

"He's gone out somewhere with Peggy, dear."

"But—but he's coming to luncheon, isn't he?"

"He told me not to expect him if he wasn't here by one o'clock. I imagine he's taking Peggy out somewhere. It's their last day together, you know."

Ruth did not reply, but her face revealed her sense of injury. The week had been a hard one for Ruth. Every morning she had left the house a little after eight, and had not gotten away from the store till five, so she saw Graham only in the evenings. If the circumstances had been different, Ruth would have resigned her position for the sake of seeing more of her brother, but as it was, her sense of honor held

her to the familiar routine. She was keeping Nelson Hallowell's position for him. She could not jeopardize Nelson's chances by consulting her own preferences.

All through the hard week Ruth had been looking forward to Saturday afternoon. It had never entered her mind that Graham was not doing the same. She had taken it for granted that the only afternoon in the week when she was free would be set apart for her especial enjoyment. And now Graham and Peggy had gone off for a good time together, without taking her into consideration. Ruth was hurt and bewildered.

Her mother read her thoughts, something that required no especial intuition, for they were written on her face. "It's what all mothers and sisters have to expect, Ruth," she said cheerily. "There comes a time when we count very little, comparatively. And you and I have reason to congratulate ourselves that Graham loves a dear, unselfish girl like Peggy."

But Ruth could not regard herself as open to congratulation. She sat down at the table opposite her mother, and made a pretense of eat-

ing. It added to her sense of injury to recall the invitation she had so summarily refused and all on Graham's account. She had thought first of him and he had not thought of her at all. Ruth's pensiveness became more and more pronounced. She hardly listened to her mother's conversational advances, answering at random, when she perceived that she was expected to say something. To be angry with Graham and Peggy hurt intolerably, and yet it seemed to her that she had a right to be angry, that both of them were acting very selfishly. Mrs. Wylie, watching her with mingled tenderness and exasperation, could not make up her mind whether what Ruth most needed was sympathy or a good shaking.

After luncheon Ruth made a very careful toilet and sat down to await Graham's return. She told herself he could not possibly stay away all the afternoon. He would remember that this was her half holiday. Or if Graham did not think, surely Peggy who had had him to herself all day long through the entire week, would be generous enough to remind him of what he owed his sister. Ruth had letters to

write but she left the writing desk unopened. A new book that she had been anxious to read lay on the table within reach, but she did not glance in its direction. Her hands folded in her lap, her eyes upon the clock, she gave herself up to the hardest work in the world, mere waiting.

Ruth was not in a mood to realize her own inconsistency. Only a few weeks before it had seemed to her that if she could be assured of her brother's safety, she would never complain of anything again. Now she knew that Graham was not only safe and sound, but was enjoying himself hugely, into the bargain, and yet her despondency grew by leaps and bounds. At three o'clock she was unhappy. At half past she was miserable. By four o'clock she was approaching desperation.

And then, just when the relief of tears seemed imperative, she caught sight of the familiar khaki uniform outside. In an instant joy banished her resentment. She sprang to her feet and ran to open the door, beaming her glad welcome. And then as she flung the door wide, every vestige of happy anticipation ebbed away,

leaving an expression of blank disappointment.

Nelson Hallowell, whose face had kindled responsive to Ruth's pleasure, looked as disappointed as she. "Good afternoon, Ruth," he stammered. "I—I guess you're expecting somebody."

"I thought you were Graham," Ruth responded lifelessly. Then at the sight of the young soldier's crestfallen air, she had the grace to feel a little ashamed of herself. "Come in, Nelson," she said more cordially.

"I'll come in for a minute, if you don't mind, Ruth, just till Graham's gets back."

This humility increased Ruth's vexation with herself. "If you wait till Graham comes," she laughed, "it may be a long minute. I don't know as we'll see him before bed time." And then afraid that Nelson would recognize the bitterness in her tone, she added hastily, "I was having an awfully stupid time all by myself, so I'm especially glad to see you."

The cordiality of this assurance seemed to banish Nelson's misgivings. He beamed at her from the arm chair she had pulled out for him. "I've been meaning to write you all the week,"

he said. "But I was afraid I couldn't do the subject justice in a letter. And really, Ruth, it's the most wonderful sweater I ever saw."

Ruth looked at him in perplexity. Her mind was still upon Graham's defection, and the divided attention she gave her caller made her a little slow to grasp the situation.

"It's a splendid warm one," continued Nelson enthusiastically. "And then it's so well knit. Some of the fellows have sweaters that look as if they'd come apart on a second wearing. And when I think of your spending all that time for me, Ruth—"

"Why, Nelson," Ruth exclaimed, awake, at last. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why, the sweater you knit me."

"*I* knit you?"

Nelson began to look troubled. "I hope you didn't want to keep it a secret, Ruth. George didn't say a word—"

"George?"

"Yes. George Dillingham, you know. He brought it to me when he got back Sunday night

and when I asked him where it came from, he said right away that you sent it."

Ruth was beginning to understand. "Did he say that *I* sent it, or that *Ruth* sent it?"

"Why, of course he said that Ruth sent it, and I—"

"And evidently you forgot that George has a cousin Ruth."

"Ruth Cummings!"

"Exactly."

"Ruth Cummings knit my sweater!"

"I don't know whether she did or not," said Ruth, laughing in spite of herself. "But if any Ruth knit a sweater and sent it to you by George Dillingham, I think it must have been she. Anyway, I didn't do it."

The disappointment she had seen in Nelson's face over her ungracious reception was a faint shadow of the emotion she now saw depicted on the young man's expressive countenance. Ruth forgot her sense of grievance in amusement. "I'm glad it's such a nice one," she said a little teasingly.

"Oh, it's a good enough sweater," muttered Nelson.

"Why, you said just now, it was the finest one you ever saw."

"Well, it *is* all right. Only you see I thought—" Nelson lifted his eyes, and perceiving Ruth's unconcealed amusement, he flushed hotly. "I guess I owe you an apology, Ruth," he said uncomfortably.

"An apology? Why?"

"Well, I took it for granted you'd made me a present, and I'm sure that already you've done a thousand times more than you had any reason to. Of course I didn't have any ground—"

"Wait, Nelson," Ruth exclaimed, made uneasy by his evident embarrassment, "I didn't knit that sweater, but I wish I had. Ruth Cummings got ahead of me, you see."

Nelson smiled faintly.

"But I'd like to knit the rest of your outfit, the helmet and socks and wristlets, you know."

"Oh, Ruth, would you really?" His radiant face and eager voice touched Ruth strangely. She reflected that she had never known anyone so appreciative as Nelson Hallowell.

"But I'm afraid they won't be knit as well as your sweater is."

"And I'll bet they'll be knit a lot better."

"Why, Nelson, you said yourself—"

"Yes, I know," admitted Nelson. "You see I thought—" He broke off to join in the laugh against himself. And when their laughter quieted, he said with a twinkle in his eye, "I hope that George Dillingham won't repeat to his cousin all I said about her."

"About Ruth Cummings?"

"Well, about the Ruth I supposed had knit my sweater. I gave him the impression that I thought her about the finest ever."

Ruth covered her face and again gave herself up to uncontrollable laughter. And from that point, the call that had begun so inauspiciously went on gaily to a termination. It was almost six o'clock when Nelson glanced at his wrist watch and jumped to his feet.

"Say, I've been staying on and on, thinking Graham would come in every minute. Where does that fellow keep himself?" His manner revealed his wonder that Graham could remain away so long from so fascinating a sister.

"He's somewhere with Peggy," Ruth replied with a significant smile.

"Peggy Raymond? Oh, well, she's a nice girl."

It seemed to Ruth that there was a reservation in his tone. Although she had criticized Peggy in her thoughts that very afternoon she did not mean that anyone else should do so. "She's the dearest girl in the world," she declared vehemently.

"She's very nice, very nice indeed," repeated Nelson speaking even more judicially than before. "But if you ask me—I shouldn't say— Well, Ruth, it's my opinion that there are other girls just as nice, and even a bit nicer. And I don't mean Ruth Cummings, either." He was crimson, in spite of his relief in getting the thing said. "I've got to run," he exclaimed. "Mother will be wondering what has become of me."

Graham came in some ten minutes later, his manner failing to suggest the absolute contentment which should characterize a young man who has spent the entire day with his sweetheart. "Why didn't you bring Peggy to din-

ner?'' asked Mr. Wylie, with a penetration which showed that the memories of his own youth were still vivid.

''That's what I tried to do,'' exclaimed Graham petulantly. ''But she has an idea that we ought to have the evening together, just the family, you know. I said everything I could think of, but Peggy has a stubborn streak in her. She wouldn't come and she wouldn't let me stay, and that ended it.''

''Why, that's all nonsense,'' sympathized Mr. Wylie. ''We look on Peggy as one of the family.''

''Of course we do, and for her to act as if her coming would be an intrusion—it's ridiculous.'' Graham looked at his mother expectantly, but for once she failed him. She was thinking of Ruth's disappointment, of her dejected face at luncheon. It was only fair that Ruth should have her brother to herself one evening out of the week.

But as Mrs. Wylie avoided her son's appealing eyes, Ruth spoke up blithely. ''If the table isn't set for Peggy, Mother, put on another plate. I'm going for her and we'll be back

in two minutes. She may bluff Graham, but she can't bluff me."

"You're a brick, Ruth," Graham cried, but to Mrs. Wylie, the praise seemed inadequate. She did not know which she was prouder of, the tall son who looked so big and manly in his uniform, or the daughter who had just won the victory over her own weakness.

Her eyes followed the slight girlish figure as it sped across the street, and there was a tenderness in her heart that almost brought the tears.

They had a very happy evening together. Peggy refused Graham's invitation for a moonlight stroll and sat beside Ruth in the hammock and they talked together as they had done in the days before it had occurred to any of them that sometimes two is company. Ruth was starting to knit a helmet, and as knitting by moonlight is not altogether easy for the unskilled, she gave her work rather close attention.

"There's not much danger I shall be cold on the other side," observed Graham complacently as he watched his sister's busy fingers. "I can

wear those things in layers, you know, one on top of the other."

"Yes, but this won't be one of the layers," exclaimed Ruth pertly, "because it's not for you."

"What!" shouted Graham in mock indignation. "Have you the heart to think of fitting out another fellow, when your poor brother has only five sweaters and three helmets, two very fine scarfs, six pairs of socks and three pairs of wristlets? Peggy, I call you to witness that she's gone back on me."

"I'll bear witness that among us we've certainly spoiled you," returned Peggy with a smile that contradicted her words.

Ruth laughed as she bent over her knitting. Her little revenge had been innocent enough so that she could be excused if she found it sweet. The soreness at her heart, which earlier in the day had seemed a permanent possession, had quite disappeared. It was astonishing what balm there was in the discovery that someone in the world thought her quite as nice—yes, even a little bit nicer than Peggy Raymond.

CHAPTER XIX

PROPAGANDA

The winged week was over and Peggy was back at work. Short as the time of her absence had seemed, it had been long enough to bring about radical changes in the community at the Poplars. Autumn was at hand. The students were getting impatient for a glimpse of home, and something in the way of relaxation before entering on the work of another strenuous year. The wage-earners were thinking of securing permanent positions. A number of the girls had already taken their departure, so the table in the dining room seemed needlessly long. And on the other hand, several new faces were in evidence. Two stenographers and a clerk in a mercantile establishment had decided to devote their brief vacations to farm work. And although it was unlikely that in two weeks time they would acquire sufficient experience to be really valuable, because of the serious short-

age of workers, they had been warmly welcomed.

Marian Keith was complaining of a lame wrist. "Peggy," she announced on the second morning, "I'm going to have you drive the bus to-day."

"Me, Marian?" Peggy cried with every evidence of consternation.

"It's time you were beginning. You've been talking about it all summer, and you've sat beside me and watched me, so that you could do it yourself."

"Yes, and the more I've watched, the more impossible it has seemed that I should ever do it."

"Don't be a goose, Peggy. You can't learn to swim without going near the water, and you can't learn to run a car without trying it. And then, I'll be right beside you, ready to help you out."

The closing assurance bolstered up Peggy's shaking confidence to such an extent that she ceased to protest, although she was evidently ill at ease. She drove the bus to the Sweetwater farm that morning without any mishap, and she

had accomplished about a third of the distance back in the afternoon, when Marian suddenly leaned forward and took the wheel from her.

Peggy started violently, turning white. "Oh, Marian, what is it? What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing at all. Everything was all right. But you looked as if you were under such a strain that all at once I wondered if it was good for you. Why can't you take it easy, Peggy when I'm right here?"

"I don't know why," replied Peggy, involuntarily sighing in her relief that the responsibility of the bus was now on Marian's shoulders. "I'm afraid I wasn't cut out for a chauffeur."

"You're not yourself, yet, Peggy," Marian answered with sisterly solicitude. "I happened to look at you just now and your eyes were bulging, and your face crimson. And when I took the wheel you turned as white as a sheet."

"I was afraid I'd done something wrong."

"Well, even if you had, it couldn't have been anything dreadful, for we're going merrily on our way. But I can see that it's too much of

a tax on you, to make it worth while to try it. I shan't ask you again."

A second time Peggy sighed her relief, though she tried to appear contrite. "I'm dreadfully ashamed."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of. You were ready and willing. Only your nerves struck."

"But here I've been sitting beside you all summer, just so I could pick it up and help you out in an emergency. If I'd let another girl have my place, probably by this time she'd have been an expert." Peggy looked disgusted at her failure to improve her opportunities, but Marian smiled tolerantly.

"Well, Peggy, it's been nice to have you here, even if I haven't made a chauffeur of you. And I've run the car all summer and it's not likely that anything will happen to me in the little time that's left."

"How short the summer seems now that we look back, instead of ahead. What are you going to do this fall, Marian?"

"Enter a nurse's training school," Marian replied promptly.

"How wonderful! But oh, Marian, you don't suppose the war will last till you've finished your training," and Peggy blanched at the thought.

"I don't believe it can, Peggy. And yet when it started over in Europe, people thought it would be ending in a few weeks. They proved mathematically, didn't they, that it would *have* to stop in six months because all the nations would be bankrupt." Something in Peggy's eyes kept her from continuing in this vein. "Whether it ends sooner or later," she said briskly, "they're going to need swarms of nurses for a good long time."

After supper Peggy had a little talk with Alice Cameron, and repeated the question she had put to Marian. "What are you going to do after you finish here, Alice?"

"I'm going with the Red Cross the first of October, Peggy. I'm so happy about it that I don't know what to do."

"I should think so," Peggy sighed, her sunny face clouding over. Alice looked at her inquiringly and it did not take any urging to induce Peggy to speak.

"Alice, I don't know what to do. Of course when I entered college, I took it for granted I was going right through the four years' course. We hadn't gone into the war then, and I guess I was only half awake, anyway. But now everything is different. There's so much work to be done that it seems selfish to spend one's time poring over books."

"I'm not sure that poring over books isn't the most important thing you can do, Peggy. This war strikes at everything good, and especially at education. See how the men in the English universities rushed to volunteer, and that's always the way. While many of the college boys are under the draft age, they're not willing to take advantage of their immunity. Most of those who are physically fit will volunteer. And comparatively few of them will go back to college after the war's over, especially if it lasts several years. We can't afford to let the standard down for our generation, Peggy. I honestly think that anyone who resists the call of these stirring times and keeps on at college is doing a real patriotic service." Alice had spoken with unwonted earnestness,

and suddenly she checked herself. "I sound like a Liberty Loan orator," she laughed.

"It sounds awful sensible to me, and inspiring, too. It's a comfort to think that when you're doing the thing you've wanted to do all your life, you're serving your country at the same time."

"It's clear enough, if you take the long view. It isn't only a question of what America needs to-day, but of what she's going to need in ten years or twenty. Of course," Alice added thoughtfully, "you girls who are in college now will miss a lot of fun we older ones had. I can't imagine your spending money for class spreads the way we used to, with children starving in Belgium."

"I should think not," flashed Peggy.

"You'll miss lots of fun, but you'll have something we missed. When I realize how little thought we girls gave our country from the beginning of our course to the end, I'm not sure that you're not more to be envied than pitied, Peggy. I'm afraid I'm beginning to be oratorical again, but I can't help it. I hope that henceforth education is going to include a course

in Americanism, running all the way from the kindergarten through the universities. I know scores of people who had to wait till the war, to find there was any duty they owed their country."

This little talk was helpful to more than Peggy. For Priscilla, who owned to the same restlessness that had attacked Peggy, confessed that it put quite a different face on the matter when you look on a college education as a patriotic service. Amy, who had not made up her mind regarding further school work, became very thoughtful when Peggy repeated to her the substance of what Alice had said. And Peggy herself, who had sternly repressed all tendency to look forward to taking up the work of her Sophomore year, as unworthy the stern times in which she lived, now permitted herself the luxury of cheerful anticipations.

On Friday of that week the girls, who were working at the Sweetwater farm, finished their assigned task about three o'clock in the afternoon, and their employer generously decided to give them the two hours remaining. "I've had my eye on you all the week, and there

hain't been a mite o' shirking, or hanging back. I'll pay you for a full day's work, and you can use the time from now till supper, just as you please."

As the girls climbed into the bus they gave three cheers for Farmer Taylor, and when his buxom, smiling wife came out on the porch to see them off, they cheered her as well. Marian drove away as they were beginning on a three times three for Sweetwater farm.

Fifteen minutes later as the bus approached a small farmhouse, rather in need of paint, and looking very insignificant beside the towering barn, Peggy, who still occupied the seat beside Marian, touched her arm. "Marian, I believe I'll stop here. Don't you remember this is the place where they had that little crippled girl. I told her that I'd come to see her again some day, and I'm afraid that if I don't do it now, I won't have another chance."

"Then you don't want us to wait for you?"

"No, indeed. I dare say they'll drive me home. Anyway I'll get back some way."

The car came to a halt and Peggy alighted. With a wave of her hand to her companions

she approached the house. The shutters of the front rooms were closed so that the building had a look of being unoccupied, but strident voices sounding in the rear gave assurance that someone was at home. Peggy went around the side of the house to the kitchen, wondering as she drew nearer whether she had chosen an opportune time for her call. Apparently several people were talking at once, and very shrilly. The argument, if argument it was, seemed hardly amicable.

But by now the bus was beyond recalling, and Peggy did not care to take a walk of several miles in the hot sun unless it should be absolutely necessary. Summoning her resolution she climbed the steps and crossed the porch. Although the flies were swarming, the screen door leading into the kitchen was ajar. Two women stood in the middle of the room engaged in a debate which, from all appearances, might easily have become a quarrel. Peggy recognized one of them as Mrs. Lane, the mother of the little cripple she had come to see. The other woman she did not know though when Mrs. Lane called her by name, a moment later, she

remembered that it was the name of a farmer living a quarter of a mile up the road.

"As far as I'm concerned, Mrs. Mowry," declared Mrs. Lane with feeling, "I ain't one to grudge my country a few jars of canned stuff, more or less. What the Government wants, the Government can have."

"And I say," choked the other woman tearfully, "that it's the next thing to stealing, Government or no Government. First they tell people to put up everything they can, all kinds of garden stuff, and preserves besides. And the next thing you know, they're around telling you that you've got too much for a family of your size, and taking whatever they please."

"They take the sons of some mothers," exclaimed Mrs. Lane. "Our children ain't old enough to wear the uniform, so we get off with a few jars—"

"Don't forget he took two hams off me," flared Mrs. Mowry. "He said that it was pretty near time for new hams, and the Government didn't allow anybody to have so many in the store room at this time of year. And then he took a cheese—"

"It ain't as if they was going to be wasted," Mrs. Lane remonstrated. "I guess the stuff the Government takes this way it feeds to the soldier boys. And they're welcome to everything I've got in my cellar."

Up to this time Peggy had stood on the porch, unnoticed by either of the two disputants, or their audience of half a dozen children. Now she advanced into the room. "Good afternoon," she said, her voice suggesting that the excitement of the group was contagious.

Both women turned. It was evident that Mrs. Lane at once recognized Peggy, for although she did not call her by name, her face brightened, as if the girl's presence reinforced her argument.

"Look at her," cried Mrs. Lane, extending her hand toward Peggy with an oratorical flourish. "See what she's doing for her country. She's a young lady, goes to college, and like enough takes music lessons, and I don't know what all. And here she is in overalls, working out of doors like a farm hand and never saying a word. And here you and I are making a fuss over a few jars—"

"And two hams," interpolated Mrs. Mowry feelingly, "*and* a cheese."

"Excuse me," interrupted Peggy who had listened to the conversation with extraordinary interest. "But as I stood outside I couldn't help overhearing. Would you mind telling me just what has happened?"

"Why, it's this way," explained Mrs. Lane. "A Government agent has just been around commandeering part of the stuff we put up this summer."

"You may call it commandeering if you like," sniffed Mrs. Mowry. "But I can't see where it's any different from stealing."

"The way they do it," continued Mrs. Lane addressing herself to Peggy, and ignoring her neighbor, "is first they look over all the stuff you've canned, and then they ask the size of your family. It seems the Government allows you just so much a person, and then they take the rest."

"But the Government has been urging people to put up as much as they possibly could," Peggy cried, amazed.

"That's what I say," whined Mrs. Mowry,

evidently gratified at having found an ally. "They tell you to can things and then they take the cans away. I'm going to bury the rest of my stuff," she added, "and dig it up as I'm ready to use it."

"Well, I'm not," shouted Mrs. Lane. "Whatever the Government wants from me, it's only got to ask for."

Peggy broke in impatiently. Admirable as Mrs. Lane's sentiments were, it seemed evident that her patriotism had made her an easy victim. "How did you know the man was a Government agent," she asked.

"Well, he said he was." Mrs. Lane was evidently taken aback by the question. "And he had something he called his badge, a red, white and blue thing."

"Was that all?"

"Yes, that was all. Why, you don't mean—" cried Mrs. Lane, "that he wasn't a Government man."

"I'm sure he wasn't. He may be a plain swindler or this may be one form of propaganda to make people discontented and suspicious of the Government." Peggy was getting tremen-

dously excited. "Which way did he go?"

"He went from here to my house," screamed Mrs. Mowry. "I guess he's going right on down the road."

"Did he have a machine?"

"Yes, a Ford car."

For a moment they stood looking at one another uncertainly. "If only the men were at home," groaned Mrs. Lane. "But they're over at Wally Corson's threshing."

"Didn't I see a bicycle out on the porch?" Peggy demanded. "Couldn't I take that?"

"Sure you can take it, but you can't catch an automobile with a bicycle."

"I suppose he stops at some of the houses quite a while."

"He stopped quite a while at my house, I can tell you," boasted Mrs. Mowry. "And I wouldn't have given him a thing if he hadn't said he had orders to arrest anybody that resisted."

"If I can't catch him, probably I'll see someone in a car who can do it—a man."

"He took my whole batch of spiced gooseberries," lamented Mrs. Lane. "And if there's

anything William is partial to, it's spiced gooseberries. I didn't mind while I thought it was for the Government but if it's a swindler—"

Peggy ran out on the porch. Though she had arrived on the scene of action too late to benefit by the period when every girl worth her salt rode a wheel, she had nevertheless mastered the art and gained considerable proficiency on Dick's bicycle. The wheel upon the porch was a shabby specimen, splashed with mud, but the tires were full and round, with the appearance of having been recently pumped up. Peggy sprang to the seat with ease, due to the fact that she had on her working clothes, and pedaling furiously, she started down the road, on the lookout for a Ford car laden with provisions.

CHAPTER XX

A RUNAWAY

Peggy stopped at each of the houses along the route to make inquiries regarding the Government agent, sent out to commandeer a goodly proportion of the household supplies, prepared by painstaking housewives. The Mowry house stood empty, as its indignant mistress had left it, when she had hurried to impart her woes to her patriotic neighbor, Mrs. Lane. At the next house the woman was red-eyed. She didn't mind about anything except the corn, she explained lugubriously. But she had worked so hard over that corn. It was a hot spell and the heat and all had brought on a sick headache. She didn't know what the Government meant by begging folks to can all they could and then sending an officer to take their things away. She talked in a soft monotonous voice, punctuated by an occasional sob.

At the next house there were no tears, but a

great deal of shrill and angry speech. Yes, the Government man had been along, and she'd told him what she thought of him. They'd bought bonds more than they could afford, she and her husband had, but never again!

The day was warm, and bicycling along a country road in mid-afternoon, painted Peggy's face an unbecoming crimson, but her indignation left her little thought to spare for physical discomfort. However willing the imposter she was trailing might be to provide himself with a store of provisions, Peggy felt sure that a more sinister purpose was back of his efforts. The thing looked to her like a deliberate move—possibly a part of a wide-reaching scheme—to undermine the confidence of the people in the Government, to make them suspicious of every new appeal. Peggy's blood boiled. She pedaled recklessly along the little foot path, at the side of the road, hoping to encounter a car containing several husky farmers to whom she could hand over her responsibility. But the only vehicles that passed, were drawn by plodding horses, and driven by women or children.

In the end she came upon the object of her

pursuit quite unexpectedly. A Ford car stood at the side of a pretty little cottage, looking so much at home that at first glance she took it for granted that it belonged there. Then she saw that the car was not empty, as she had thought for a moment, but that it carried quite a load, boxes and baskets closely packed with jars of canned stuff. From the open windows of the cottage came the sound of voices. A woman was expostulating excitedly. The voice that answered her was deep and gruff and menacing.

Peggy was a girl who never lacked courage, and in the present instance, urged on by burning indignation, she had never once thought of being afraid. But something in the tones of the big, bullying voice awoke her sleeping caution. She hid her wheel in the bushes at the side of the road, and approached the house, keeping out of sight as far as possible. From behind a clump of lilac bushes, she peered through the window into the kitchen where an animated dialogue was taking place.

The man was as big and rough as his voice.

Somehow she had not counted on his being quite so broad shouldered and brutal. He wore his hat tipped at a rakish angle, and his long black cigar was tilted at another angle. Peggy's plan to face him and denounce him as an imposter did not seem quite as simple as it had appeared earlier.

"You mean to tell me this is all the stuff you have put up!" the man was demanding as Peggy behind the screening lilacs composed herself to listen. "You want to be careful, let me tell you, ma'am. You can't play horse with the United States Government."

"I haven't had so much time for canning things," the woman said nervously.

"Well, I guess I'll take a look in your cellar. Hiding things when an agent of the Government asks to see 'em, is a serious offense in the eye of the law."

"Wait a minute," the woman cried, attempting to intercept him as he moved toward the cellar door. "I've got some stuff down there that ain't mine. I did it for a friend. She bought the jars and sugar and everything, and

she's going to pay me for my work when she takes it away."

Peggy could not hear the man's answer, though the rumble of his deep voice reached her ears, blended with the shrill explanations and protests of the mistress of the cottage. Both voices grew faint. Peggy turned and looked at the car standing at a little distance from the house, with its load of stolen provisions. She moved quickly toward it. An audacious idea had entered her head, which sober second thought would have pronounced out of the question. But Peggy had no time for a second thought.

Desperately she began cranking the machine, her heart thumping so noisily that it would have been easy to mistake it for the throbbing of the engine. It seemed an interminable time before the engine responded, and at any minute the broad-shouldered ruffian with the uptilted cigar was likely to appear. Luckily the altercation in the cellar was becoming more violent. The woman had raised her voice almost to a scream. The man was shouting angrily. When at length the welcome chug-chug of the

engine answered her efforts, Peggy scrambled to the driver's seat and seized the wheel. She had acted without the loss of a second, and that was lucky, for she had not a second to spare. As the car started, a bellow of rage reached her ears. Inarticulate at first, it translated itself presently into speech, "Stop, or I'll fire."

Peggy took the short cut to the gate. It was a wide gate, but her wheel struck one of the posts, and it went over with an unpleasant crashing sound. The car lurched and tipped and righted itself. Peggy could hear the woman screaming, and the man roaring commands, but she never looked back. She struck the road and kept straight on. Whether the imposter she had balked was armed or not, she did not know, but in any case he did not fulfil his threat. He did not fire.

Peggy's ten-mile ride to the town she had chosen as her destination was not without excitement. She met an automobile coming from another direction, and had the greatest difficulty in keeping to her side of the road, so much difficulty indeed, that the driver of the other car shouted back something she could not under-

stand, but which sounded both indignant and insulting. As she neared the town, vehicles became more numerous, but they showed a singular generosity in regard to the road, turning out so as to leave her in undisputed possession. Vaguely Peggy realized that they all seemed interested in her performance.

Once she was almost sure that she ran over a chicken, and the shock was not lessened by the certainty that it was the chicken's fault. It had courted destruction by running in front of the car when it was too late to turn out, or slow up. For a moment the car seemed to contemplate jumping the fence and scaling an adjacent hay stack, but it changed its mind and went hurrying on its way, before the men working in the field nearby could pick up the implements they had dropped.

Peggy had been in the town she was approaching several times during her stay at the Poplars. She had thought it a rather small and sleepy town, and she was really amazed to find so many people on the streets. She blew her horn continuously, and felt far more fright-

ened than when the self-styled Government agent had threatened to fire.

At length she reached the building which throughout this wild ride had been her objective, a low brick building with a sign over the door announcing that it was the police station. Peggy's efforts to draw up to the curb were not altogether successful. The car went further than she intended and collided with a telephone pole. Peggy went out over the wheel.

A man in blue uniform rushed out of the police station. It was not till Peggy had assured him a number of times that she was not hurt in the least, that the concern of his manner changed to severity. "I'm afraid," he said, "that I'll have to arrest you for reckless driving. Where's your operator's license?"

"I—I haven't any."

"Hm! Looks as if I should have to arrest you for that too. Why, hello!"

The chief of police was looking at Peggy as if he expected her to explain something. "Well, what is it?" she asked patiently.

"You haven't any license number on this car.

I suppose you know that's an offense in the eyes of the law."

"It isn't my car. I just took it."

Apparently the chief of police was not accustomed to such frankness on the part of criminals. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his moist brow. And then Peggy began to explain. Almost from the first word, the severity of her listener's manner—evidently a professional manner—was replaced by the geniality apparently characteristic of the normal man. And to Peggy's relief he agreed absolutely with her diagnosis of the case.

"Folks need to keep their eyes open nowadays," he said. "Of course this fellow may be just a clever sharper who saw an easy way to stock up for the winter. But I reckon he's one of a good many working systematically to discredit our Government with our people. Now if you'll wait till I've locked up these things, I'll get my car and take you home. I want to see these women and tell 'em they can have their stuff after identifying it. And I want a description of this scamp."

"There's a bicycle I borrowed to chase him

with," said Peggy. "I left it in the bushes beside the road. If you wouldn't mind taking it back to Mrs. Lane's, for I'm beginning to feel that I've done all I can."

"Sure thing, I'll take it home. So you chased him on a bicycle, did you?" The chief of police chuckled appreciatively. "Ever think of going into the secret service, Miss? There's a good many ladies working on the quiet, they tell me."

"Oh, no," Peggy said hastily. "Once is enough for me, quite enough."

Peggy did not reach home till long after the dinner hour, so late indeed, that Priscilla was secretly becoming worried. And when she arrived in the car of the chief of police, excitement reigned supreme. Peggy had not eaten a mouthful since her sandwiches at noon, but her plea that she was hungry was sternly ignored till she had explained in full.

"Well, I never." Maud Elting drew a long breath. "I think you're the luckiest girl I know, Peggy Raymond. Everything nice and exciting happens to you. It's just like living in a story."

"I've had a plenty of excitement this summer, I'll admit, but if you think it's nice, you're welcome to my share."

Maud ignored Peggy's protest. "And I just go on in the old humdrum way, nothing ever happening. I don't think it's fair."

"Can't I go out and get a little supper now?" asked Peggy plaintively. "I'm almost starved."

"Yes, take the poor child to the kitchen, Marian," said Mrs. Lockwood, "and find her something to eat." And Peggy, too hungry to wait to change her clothes or even to remove the dust which streaked and smeared her tired face, followed Marian to test the resources of the pantry.

It was while she was dispatching sandwiches at a surprising rate that Marian said thoughtfully, "After all, it wasn't wasted, Peggy, your sitting front with me this summer and watching me drive."

Peggy set down her glass of milk, her face suddenly thoughtful. "Marian, do you know what it reminds me of?"

"Why, no. What is it?"

"Don't you remember what Mordecai said to Queen Esther, 'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this.' Why, Marian, it looks as if my doing what I did to-day had all been planned out beforehand, and as if I'd been made ready for that very thing. Why, if you hadn't made me drive the bus the first of the week, I never could have run off with that car the way I did to-day."

"And I was blaming myself for making you do it. You looked as if it were such a strain."

"I'm afraid I wasn't a very creditable pupil," Peggy acknowledged, laughing nervously as she recalled some of the details of her wild flight. "But anyway I checkmated that rascal and didn't kill myself or anybody else. And now I'm going straight upstairs to bed, for I never was so tired in all my life."

The women who identified their property at the police station within the next few days were not ungrateful. During Peggy's last week at the Poplars she came home one afternoon to find that in her absence a basket had been left at the house, a tag tied to the handle on which her name was inscribed. On examination it proved

to contain a good sized ham, a delectable cheese, a number of jars of vegetables, and a generous supply of jellies and preserves. Peggy suggested that they all should be used for dinner the following evening, a proposal carried without a dissenting voice. The ham after boiling was stuck full of cloves, sprinkled with sugar and browned in the oven, and the hungry girls did full justice to it, in spite of the temptations offered by peas and corn, string beans and tomatoes, to say nothing of six varieties of preserves.

"I'm certainly glad that no traitor to the U. S. A. is going to get a taste of this," declared Amy, helping herself generously to some of Mrs. Lane's spiced gooseberry. "It's almost a pity, Peggy, that you didn't let him get a bigger load, before you ran off with it. Then we could have lived on preserves till it was time to go home."

CHAPTER XXI

GOOD-BY SUMMER

The summer was over. The green landscape which had charmed the Friendly Terrace girls their first day at the Poplars had arrayed itself in a different garb, brown and russet, with here and there a touch of scarlet. The feathered aristocrats were on their way to the Palm Beaches of the bird world. The squirrels were fat and busy. The bare wheat fields, the shocked corn, standing in picturesque rows, told that the work of summer was done.

The breaking up at the Poplars had not been an altogether cheerful occasion in spite of the anticipation with which the girls were looking ahead. Minna Eichenberger had proffered her services to the Y. M. C. A. to sing at the camps for the entertainment of the men, and when she had demonstrated what she could do in that line, her offer had been promptly accepted.

"And they never said a word about my name," she told Peggy rapturously, "never referred to its being German."

"Of course not, you silly thing. There are generals in our army with names just as German as yours."

Minna laid her hand over Peggy's, and her eyes were alight with gratitude. "If it hadn't been for you, I should have run away and given up trying to do anything for my country. I'd grown so morbid that I couldn't judge anything fairly. You helped me out of the scrape I'd gotten into through my own silliness, and I'll never forget it."

Mag Whipple, too, came to Peggy with her plans for the future. "A girl I used to work with at the dairy lunch room wrote me that I could have my old place back as quick as a wink. But I'm not going."

"Oh, aren't you?" Peggy asked, a little puzzled by Mag's air of resolution.

"No. There's plenty of girls that can sling hash—I mean—well, you know what I mean. In these days if a girl's got muscles like that, it's up to her to use 'em where they'll count."

Mag held up her powerful arm for inspection, and there was nothing perfunctory in Peggy's admiration.

"Yes, Mag, it's splendid. I'd love to be strong like that. What do you think you'll do?"

"Well, there are several big plants where they are ready to take on women if they can do the work, and I can do it. If I was as strong up here," said Mag touching her forehead, "as I am in my arms and back, I'd be all right."

"I think you're unfair to yourself," Peggy declared earnestly. "You're really a very bright girl. The longer I know you, the surer I am of it."

Mag hung her head. Nothing could better have illustrated the change in her than the fact that Peggy's compliment seemed to increase her humility.

"The trouble with me," she replied, "is that I've been too smart to learn things. I've been so set up over the little I knew that I didn't care a rap about all that I didn't know. I guess maybe there's some hope for me, now I see what a fool I've made of myself."

Peggy was not sure just how to answer this, and before she could decide on a sufficiently diplomatic phrasing, Mag had changed the subject.

"Peggy, what do you think of my calling myself Margaret Whipple, instead of Mag?"

"I believe it would be a good idea. Sometimes I've wondered if it wasn't time for me to drop the Peggy."

The other girl protested. "Oh, I'd hate that. Peggy's cute and beside it seems to fit you. But Mag sounds like a rough-neck and it ain't—isn't—going to fit me any longer. I've done with that rough and tumble stuff, you bet your life, I mean—well, you know what I mean."

They ate breakfast together on Saturday morning for the last time. Already their numbers had dwindled. Twenty instead of forty sat at the long table, and tried to talk as usual, but the thought of change and separation, in a world where change and separation had become the order of the day, cast a shadow over the spirits of the most volatile. In spite of themselves there was a cadence of melancholy in their light chatter. And when it came to

bidding Mrs. Lockwood good-by, several of the girls shed tears. Even Peggy, trying to smile over her farewells, found her lips tremulous.

"You blessed girl," Mrs. Lockwood took Peggy in her arms, "I suppose you know that from the hour you came, you've been a blessing and an inspiration to us all."

"I don't believe you remember the hour I came nor the first week afterward quite so well as I do, Mrs. Lockwood." Peggy was trying to laugh the compliment aside. "After one day of sticking tomatoes, I was so stiff and lame and sore and discouraged, I was afraid I was going to limp all the rest of my life."

"You were a wonderful lot, you girls," Mrs. Lockwood declared. "I should have liked to invite some of the people I know—Americans who are always sneering at America—to have visited us this summer and watched you girls at work. It has made me an optimist for the future of my country."

Before noon the girls who for most of the summer had lived under one roof, had scattered in all directions. Quite a number took the train to the city along with Peggy, Priscilla, and

Amy. Marian Keith was to enter the nurses' training school without the loss of a day. Alice Cameron was to spend a week with her parents before taking up her new work with the Red Cross.

After the forty miles ride to the city, there was another time of taking leave, and then three eager girls turned their faces toward Friendly Terrace. Trunks had been tabooed at the Poplars, so all three were loaded down with hand luggage which they handled with much greater ease than would have been possible at the beginning of the summer. People glanced at them curiously as they climbed aboard the street car, at their tanned faces, their glowing cheeks, their bright eyes and buoyant erectness. If the Land Army had needed a defense, the appearance of these three girls would have been sufficient justification of its methods.

Three waiting mothers on Friendly Terrace joyfully greeted the returned workers, their satisfaction increased by the knowledge that the summer's experiment, regarding which most of them had felt an anxious uncertainty, was over at last. And in a down-town book

store an alert little saleswoman blundered in making out her checks, and kept her eye upon the clock in a fashion most unusual.

Before Ruth could finish her luncheon, the three friends she was so impatient to see had made their appearance, and the fried potatoes and cocoa cooled while they hugged and kissed one another as if they had been separated for at least a year. Then, yielding to the urgency of her callers, Ruth finished the meal in which she had lost interest, and they adjourned to the porch. It was the first of October, and there was a tang in the air suggestive of coming frosts, but the girls who had worked out of doors all summer found the confinement of four walls oppressive.

Sitting there in the sunshine as they had sat on Amy's porch when they made their plans for the summer, they now planned the work of the coming year. Peggy and Priscilla were to start their college work on Monday, a few days late. "If you and Amy were going to enter Freshmen," Peggy sighed pensively, "how perfect it would be."

Ruth sighed too, but shook her head. "You

may have finished college before I get a chance to enter. It all depends on how long the war lasts. I promised Nelson I'd hold his place for him, and I'm going to do it."

"How about you, Amy?" Peggy asked. She had put the same question on a number of occasions, but Amy, who had an incomprehensible streak of reticence, combined with her customary frankness, had only replied that she hadn't quite decided.

"Yes, Amy," Priscilla chimed in, "you can't stay on the fence much longer. You've got to make up your mind whether you're going to college or not."

"I have made up my mind," Amy replied. "I'm going to wait for Ruth."

"Oh, Amy," Ruth cried, with a fervent gratitude which did not keep her from adding immediately, "but are you sure that you really want to wait, when it may be such a long time?"

"I read the other day about a lady who graduated from college with her own granddaughter," Amy replied. "We can't be any older than that. And think how our classmates

will look up our gray hairs and respect our wrinkles."

"But if you're going to wait for Ruth," said Peggy, disregarding the levity of Amy's closing sentence, "what are you going to do this year?"

"That's all been settled since eleven o'clock this morning. You know the Red Cross is going to look after the families of soldiers that are sick or hard up. Mother's been awfully interested in that work, and it seems that they need a girl at headquarters to answer the telephone. They've had girls who volunteered to work one day a week, but generally that particular day they would be sick, or else have something else that just had to be done. So it seemed simpler to have some girl volunteer to do it all the time, just as if she were getting paid for it."

"Then you're not going to have a salary?" asked Priscilla.

"Oh, dear no," smiled Amy. "I shan't need a salary with all I've saved this summer."

The girls laughed in joyous understanding. The half-dollar a day remaining after they paid their board had been saved scrupulously

for payments on their Liberty Bonds. After buying their tickets for home the combined wealth of the trio amounted to less than five dollars.

"We won't any of us be very flush this year," said Peggy. "Amy will be working for nothing, and Ruth gives half her salary to Mrs. Hallowell, and Priscilla and I will be doing all sorts of things so we can pay for our bonds. It's lucky that in war time it's the fashion to go shabby."

Ruth changed the subject abruptly. "Peggy, when did you hear from Graham?"

"Why, not since Monday. I thought perhaps there'd be a line waiting for me at home, but there wasn't."

"We haven't heard this week. Oh, Peggy," cried Ruth, her face lighting with sudden animation, "perhaps he's going to get leave for to-morrow and means to surprise us."

Peggy's face, too, lighted up. "I believe that's it. And that's why he hasn't written."

"There comes the postman now," said Amy. "Perhaps there will be a letter from Graham saying that he doesn't care to come home at

present, that he's found things that interest him more."

They were all laughing as the postman came up the walk, not the broad shouldered young postman they all knew, who swung along even under the Christmas mail as if it were a mere bagatelle, but a man considerably past middle life, who walked with a shuffling step and seemed to find his bag quite enough of a load.

"Is that all?" asked Ruth in a disappointed tone, as he handed her a post card.

"That's all to-day. I'll try to do better by you Monday," smiled the postman affably and he limped on to the next house. "Mr. Miller is in the service, I suppose," observed Peggy glancing after the stooping figure.

The eyes of the other girls went to Ruth, the only one qualified to answer Peggy's question. Amy uttered a sharp ejaculation. Priscilla started violently. Peggy turned from watching the postman, and rose from her chair. "Why, Ruth," she cried, "Ruth dear, what is it?"

The emotion in Ruth's white face seemed inexplicable. She was staring down at the post

card in her shaking hand, a picture post card, representing a small boy in a little boat, waving a handkerchief to a small girl on shore. It was seemingly an innocent, foolish little card that might appeal to a small child. Certainly nothing about it explained the look of frozen dismay on Ruth's face.

Twice Ruth made a futile effort to answer Peggy's question. The third time she succeeded.

"It means—it means that he's going across."

"Graham!"

Ruth started and let the little card drop at her feet. "Oh, Peggy, do you think it could be, and that's why he hasn't written?"

"Ruth dearie, please try to tell me what has frightened you so; I can't understand."

With an effort Ruth regained her self-possession sufficiently to explain. "Why, the last time Nelson was home, Peggy, we took luncheon down town together and then we stopped at a stationer's, to buy some post cards for one of the boys in camp. And I noticed his choosing this among the others and I wondered why. When we left the store, he showed it to me and

said, 'Ruth, if they should send us across without giving us a chance to say good-by, I'll mail this to you and you'll know when it comes, I'm on my way.' "

The quartette upon the porch was silent. Amy stooped and picked up the foolish little post card that had brought such startling information, and laid it gently in Ruth's lap. All four girls were pale. If the news meant less to Amy and Priscilla than to Peggy and Ruth, the thought that their lifelong friends, playmates and schoolmates, were perhaps now on the Atlantic, menaced by the U-boats, the assassins of the sea, was more than a match for youth's light spirits. Grave and silent and with thoughtful eyes they looked at one another.

Peggy was the first to speak. She had been through the same conflict of feeling very recently, and she had only to follow the trail she had already blazed.

"Girls, I think we had better not say a word about this."

"Not speak of it?" asked Ruth in amazement. "Not tell father and mother?"

"Of course you must do as you think best about telling your father and mother, but I shan't tell mine. In the first place it would only make them anxious, without doing any good. And in the second place the more people there are who know about it the more likely it is to leak out. Don't you see, Ruth, the Government is keeping the movements of the troops a secret in order to protect the boys and we mustn't let the secret out."

Ruth looked down at the post card in her lap. "I'm sure Nelson didn't think of that," she said rather piteously.

"Of course he didn't," Peggy answered. "But we do, and we've got to be careful."

"I rather think," remarked Amy, with a shrewd glance at Peggy's face, "that your mother will know the minute she looks at you."

Peggy sighed, then smiled.

"No, she won't because I shan't let her see me till I look natural. That's one thing we've got to learn, girls. There are anxious days ahead of us, and it won't do for us to go about looking worried and heart broken, undermining the courage of every one who comes near us.

On the other side the boys will be laughing and joking, even in the trenches. And we must be worthy of them."

The early autumn twilight was coming on when the conference broke up. The four girls separated and the face of each as she went her way wore a look of serene strength. Each might have been accepted as typical of the America which commanded her heart's devotion, resolute and confident, not belittling the crisis, but summoning strength to meet it, facing the future unafraid.

THE END

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